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ART AND EMOTION SERIES (ON LONELINESS) 3 JULY – 30 AUGUST 2026

***ARE YOU LONELY
TONIGHT?
I'M SO LONESOME
I COULD CRY.***

AT ACCA, AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

ART AND EMOTION SERIES (ON LONELINESS) 3 JULY – 30 AUGUST 2026
Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.

GIDEON APPAH
POLLY BORLAND
SETH BROWN
LUCY LIU
NATASHA MATILA-SMITH
KAYLA MATTES
CALLUM MCGRATH
NICK MULLALY
MELISSA NGUYEN
PATRICK POUND
KELLY YU

Curated by
SOPHIE PRINCE AND MYLES RUSSELL-COOK

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ADVISORY NOTE:
This publication contains sensitive content. Reader
discretion is advised. Selected texts and artworks reference
subjects of sex, suicide, genocide and war, and at times
contain mature language.

ACCA acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, Boonwurrung, and Bunurong peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands and waterways on which we operate and welcome visitors. We pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present, as well as to all members of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their longstanding and continuing care for Country, and we recognise First Peoples art and cultural practice has been thriving here for millennia. We extend our respect to ancestors and Elders past and present, and to all First Nations people.

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It is my great pleasure to present *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so Lonesome I could cry.* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), the inaugural exhibition in ACCA's new Art and Emotion series.

I wanted to do this exhibition because, like a lot of people, sometimes I get very lonely. Loneliness shapes our connections and disconnections. It is not only an absence, but a complex emotional landscape that can emerge even in moments of apparent togetherness. This thematic exploration invites us to consider loneliness as a multifaceted phenomenon that is both deeply personal and profoundly collective.

Curating this exhibition with the always insightful Sophie Prince has been a deeply rewarding experience, both personally and professionally, providing us with a unique opportunity to engage with loneliness, and its pervasive presence in our society. This exhibition is offered up as a reminder of how universal loneliness is, both as a modern structural condition exacerbated by urban living and digital connectivity, and as a deeply personal experience prevalent across time and place; one that is particularly familiar to many artists.

Victorian era art critic Walter Pater once said that all art aspires to the condition of music, and indeed, music has helped us connect many of the ideas in this show with art and emotion. The exhibition title references a song by Hank Williams, later popularised by Elvis Presley, and draws inspiration from diverse reflections on loneliness that span music, literature, film, and theatre. The exhibition identity and publication, developed by ACCA's Graphic Designer, Clayton Walker, includes references to Kylie Minogue's *Confide in Me* (1994) music video and the cover of Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes* (1992). Each artist was invited to share a song about loneliness, available as a playlist on our website; an homage to Robert Weiss' observation that loneliness is more often explored by songwriters than social scientists.

Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry. features the generous work of eleven artists from around the world: Gideon Appah, Polly Borland, Seth Brown, Lucy Liu, Callum McGrath, Natasha Matila-Smith, Kayla Mattes, Nick Mullaly, Melissa Nguyen, Patrick Pound, and Kelly Yu. We are so honoured to see and feel seen by these artists' works. This catalogue includes specially commissioned writing by Judy Annear, Claire G. Coleman, Dr David Harworth, Beau Newham, James Nguyen, Katie Paine, and Bridget Thompson. Together, their voices form a chorus of our times, reflecting the intimate intersections of loneliness, connection, and the human condition through a diverse array of writing and references. Bound together only by a shared reflection on loneliness as an emotional state, the exhibition spans painting, sculpture, installation, photography, film, and tapestry. Each of the works has been chosen or commissioned for their ability to reveal how art is a vital medium for understanding the elusive nature of loneliness.

Are you lonely tonight? I'm so Lonesome I could cry. challenges preconceptions of loneliness that have all too often incited internalised shame and privacy, to instead present loneliness not as a crisis but as a complex and shared state of being, one that can be both productive and debilitating, experienced alone or in the company of others. From bed rotting to doom scrolling, the internet to the archive, and animals to humans, each artist delves

into the nuances of loneliness, examining its implications in contemporary life.

At this moment, *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.* serves as a reminder that loneliness is a universal condition that, somewhat ironically, connects us all. Its timely offering to visitors would not be possible without the considerate work of ACCA's core team. I extend special thanks to Exhibition Manager, Samantha Vawdrey, Senior Curator, Shelley McSpedden, and Executive Director, Laura De Neefe for bringing their dynamic skillsets, creativity and pragmatism to delivering such an ambitious exhibition during a particularly precarious time in global politics. I would also like to recognise and thank Education & Creative Engagement Coordinator, Freya Alexander, as well as Head of Learning & Creative Engagement Felicia Pinchen-Hogg and the wider Education team for extending the offerings of the exhibition through exciting and meaningful programs.

The exhibition would not have been realised without the commitment and support of Exhibition Media Partner Vogue Australia, Exhibition Partner Dulux, Government Partners, Creative Australia, Creative Victoria and City of Melbourne, as well as ACCA's truly inspiring community of loyal supporters. We also deeply value the support of our Media Partners 3RRR, Art Guide, Broadsheet, The Guardian and Art Ink titles, VAULT, to Be and Union for their amplification of ACCA's important program. This multifaceted and visionary support of ACCA's operations is vital to platforming art that is *always New, always Now, always Free.*

This exhibition feels both timely and necessary, and we look forward to the Art and Emotion series continuing in 2027 with *All day long I felt like smashing my face in a clear glass window*, amidst the many other refreshing exhibitions set in our forward program.

MYLES RUSSELL-COOK
Artistic Director & CEO

***ARE YOU LONELY
TONIGHT?
I'M SO LONESOME I
COULD CRY.***



MYLES RUSSELL-COOK

Art captures the contours of emotion, giving form to what is often unspoken or overlooked. It offers a space where we can find each other.

Writing about loneliness, I find myself moving between references, artworks, and memories—from my father to the climate crisis, a penguin in Antarctica to a studio in New York. This restlessness reveals the elusive way loneliness resists a single definition. It is woven into everything: present in fleeting moments, private memories, and the very fabric of our shared experience. It can surface anywhere and at any time: through the unspoken connections between strangers or as it passes quietly through families. It lives in the stories we inherit, the rituals we enact, and the fragile everyday connections that make up our lives.

I keep returning to consider how loneliness can be made visible, how artists transform the hidden feelings of our everyday lives into something tangible. The acts of creating, telling stories, painting, and gathering connect us, forming a fundamental part of what it means to be alive. Emotion and art are not separate things but shifting facets of the same kaleidoscope of human experience. Art dually reflects and shapes how we understand the world. It is this understanding that inspired *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry*.

The exhibition title references the aching refrain of Hank Williams’ song of the same name, later popularised by Elvis Presley. The lyrics are about longing, framing loneliness not as spectacle or crisis but as a quiet, persistent emotional state that threads throughout everyday life. In *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*—a recurrent curatorial reference for Sophie Prince and I while discussing and writing about this exhibition—author, Olivia Laing highlights Robert Weiss’ observation that loneliness is more often explored by songwriters than social scientists.¹ Laing compares the subjective mysteries of loneliness to navigating a new city, where one must start by getting lost to find one’s own way. She posits that when we live ‘cheek by jowl’² in cities, loneliness can take on a distinct flavour—one shaped by an absence of connection rather than by physical solitude. Laing observes that conflicting aspects of loneliness have informed adverse characterisations in psychology, including as a ‘chronic disease, without redeeming features’,³ and ‘such a painful, frightening experience that people do practically everything to avoid it... includ[ing] a strange reluctance on the part of psychiatrists to seek scientific clarification on the subject’.⁴

Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry marks the first iteration of the Art and Emotion series at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA). Beginning with loneliness, and moving through rage, joy, and beyond, each thematic exhibition within the series seeks to embrace the ineffable, strange, and subjective through atmospheric exhibitions where audiences may centre their own genuine conceptual encounters. As a thematic group exhibition, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry* spans painting, sculpture, installation, photography, film, and tapestry. What connects artists and their work is not a shared medium, but a shared impulse: to give form to what we so often struggle to say aloud.

01 Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Canongate Books, London, 2017, p. 26.

02 Ibid., p. 3.

03 Robert Weiss quoted in Laing, 2017, p. 4.

04 Frieda Fromm-Reichmann quoted in Liang, 2017, p. 23.

EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPES

In 2007, German filmmaker Werner Herzog captured footage of a gentoo penguin breaking from its colony and marching, with unnerving determination, toward the Antarctic interior. The scene appears in *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), an anthropological documentary of those who live and work in Antarctica. Where the Arctic, derived from the Greek *arktos*, meaning bear, is the realm of polar bears, *antarktikos* denotes its opposite: a land without them. If loneliness has a natural habitat, perhaps it is here. Not because loneliness is necessarily found where there is nothing but because here, the very fabric of reality is defined by that which is lacking.

I first watched the film on a VHS recording from SBS, complete with ads. Years later, footage of the penguin resurfaced online as a poetic meme; a shorthand for the human urge to run away. *But why?* Where it is headed, there is no promise of food, mating, or survival, only whiteness and certain death. Herzog does not overexplain; he allows the penguin’s solitary trajectory to register as something more unsettling than instinct or insanity. From documentary to meme, the so called ‘nihilistic penguin’ speaks to our capacity to be overtaken by emotion and drawn towards the horizonless void.

The Germans call it *wanderlust*, or *fernweh*, literally meaning ‘the lust to wander’, or ‘distance-sickness’; it is an ache to be somewhere, anywhere other than ‘here’. While working on *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry*. I have had the opportunity to speak with artists, academics, friends, family, lovers, and strangers. Discussions of what loneliness feels like have revealed varied but familiar responses that go beyond a single word. Some have described loneliness as a feeling that something is missing, even if you cannot name what it is; others describe a loss of purpose, a darkness, a hollow feeling like being hungry but not knowing what might satisfy you; and another defined it as an echo that arrives before the sound. One person compared being lonely to being swallowed by a whale. Aggregating these conversations, I consider that for many, loneliness goes hand in hand with a sense of searching within for something that is missing.



Untitled illustration. Source: sanstitre (commissions closed) (@sanstitre2000), post on X, 30 August 2025.

The Nihilist Penguin. Source: heart of half-artist, “The Nihilist Penguin: Where did his heart take him?”, ILLUMINATION (Medium), 31 January 2026.



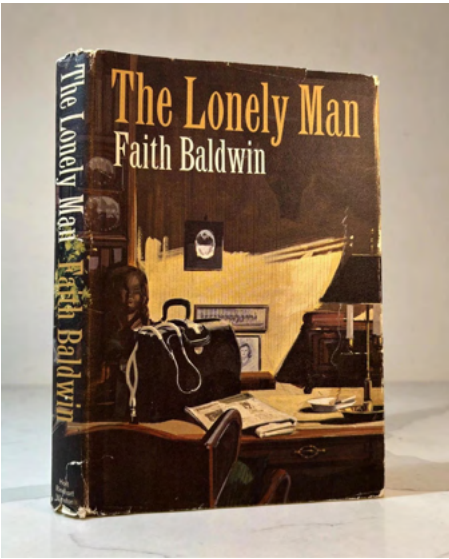
When audiences arrive at ACCA, one of the first works they encounter in the cavernous main gallery is an expansive installation specially commissioned for *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry*. A compulsive collector, Patrick Pound's *The museum of loneliness* 2026 continues the artist's practice of turning to his ever-growing archive of objects, or rather, 'things' left behind, and carefully ordering them into configurations that make visible the passages of time and distance that shape us.

For Pound, loneliness is not found in a dramatic absence, but in the quiet persistence of ordinary things: present, unremarkable, yet fundamental to reconciling our inner and outer worlds. Rather than running away from dissonance, his work tends toward accumulation and stillness. His practice asks, when a 'thing' is removed from its original context, what meanings stay with it? What do our collections of 'stuff' say about us?

Amid his new installation is a small leather statue of a penguin. This lonely penguin is a gentle nod to the nihilism captured by Werner Herzog that subsequently resonated so widely across the internet. If Herzog's penguin ran away into a white void of nothingness, Pound's penguin turns in the opposite direction. It is static, joining a chorus of objects that together fill emptiness with texture and networked meanings.

The museum of loneliness includes books such as *The Lonely Man* (1964) by Faith Baldwin, Beatrice Levin's *The Lonely Room* (1950), *Lonely Crusade* (1940) by Chester Himes, and *The Girl on the Lonely Beach* (1954)—a novel about the murder of Starr Faithfull. There are vinyl records, a single porcelain finch, shoes without their pair, an array of religious or spiritual objects, as well as decorative mementos and toys.

Together, they represent an archaeology of life. Through objects, Pound contemplates how loneliness moves; not through a single experience or feeling, but as something fragmented and contradictory, yet familiar. As Pound puts it, *The museum of loneliness* is full of 'the tragicomic bric-a-brac of life and loneliness'. From ceramics to sheet music, it captures en masse 'the sweet melancholy of remnant things'.



All images: Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

All Images: Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026



The French writer Michel de Montaigne and the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau turned to self-isolation to access philosophical clarity. By contrast, Roman philosopher Boethius wrote from imprisonment and exile, ‘the worst sting of misery is to have been happy’,⁵ revealing how solitude can produce paralysis and alienation, rather than enlightenment. Boethius reminds us that loneliness can sharpen itself through memory, not only through relations to place.

The power of memory and place over one’s emotional landscape is explored through the work of Gideon Appah. Inspired by memories of life at Busua Beach and Kokrobite in Ghana, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision 2025* is a filmic work that moves gently toward the possibility of becoming. The work is shown alongside his painting *Boy with a bird* 2023 that depicts a single figure looking intently down at his hands with a parrot perched atop his afro. Born in Accra, the capital of Ghana, Appah is known for luminous, dreamlike paintings that draw on childhood memory, West African landscapes, and the textures of everyday life; the artist moving fluidly between the personal and the mythological. In *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* this sensibility extends into depictions of time and movement. Drawing on an Akan saying that translates as ‘to human is difficult’, Appah reflects on the labour of inhabiting one’s own body; of learning to live inside it without performance or demand. He suggests that the self resists, twists, and even hides, yet it remains ours to shape into something whole.

Set against the vast, shifting expanse of the ocean, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* follows surfers who move in and out of the frame, alone but never truly solitary. There is a quiet discipline to the wait for a wave, and a surrender to forces beyond human control. What emerges is a different understanding of solitude, not as lack, but as a slow and deliberate practice, a way of carrying oneself, like water, without spilling.

As Sophie Prince explores further in her curatorial essay, Appah’s work draws on the idea of the ocean as a setting for emotional calibration. In the same way that people go for long hikes alone in the wild to find a sense of inner connection and belonging, the surfers in *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* and the figure in *Boy with a bird* are on their own, but never alone, for nature is their companion. Loneliness here becomes a threshold; one that asks what it might mean to belong, first, to oneself.

05 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book II, Prose 4, 1902. <https://monadnock.net/boethius/consolation2-p4.html> [accessed 20 April 2026].

All images pp. 18-19: Gideon Appah, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision 2025* (still) two-channel video with sound, 06:12 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.



All images pp. 19-20: Gideon Appah, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision 2025* (still) two-channel video with sound, 06:12 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.



I was lonely in Los Angeles when I came up with the idea to do a show about loneliness. LA has long held a special place in my heart, partly from watching comedian Steve Martin’s surrealist masterpiece *LA Story* (1991) with my family growing up. The film follows a man adrift in a city defined by excess, choice, and surface-level connection, where meaning and genuine intimacy are perpetually denied. In one scene, Harris (played by Martin) writes ‘Bored Beyond Belief’ on his window with a marker. This made me think of loneliness not just be an emotional state, but as a structural condition of our species, one exacerbated by modern, high-density, disconnected urban living. Our perpetual mobility and over-reliance on our phones have created a paradox: we are more connected, and yet more disconnected than ever before.

Cities are often described as lonely, but loneliness does not belong to the metropolis any more than it belongs to Antarctica. It does not adhere to borders, maps, or postcodes. Loneliness is part of what it means to be alive. It is as much a temporal state as a physical one. Loneliness is a fear of what, or what may not, come next.

In modern urban life, mechanised and impersonal encounters are increasingly normalised. The very structures of industry and society can foster a profound sense of alienation as our everyday exchanges are increasingly mediated by technology. With each mediation, our sense of isolation can deepen. These tensions are explored in the work of LA-based artists Seth Brown and Kayla Mattes, also both early inspirations for the exhibition. Mattes’ practice draws on the lineage of textile-based conceptual artists, reimagining the tradition of tapestry for the digital age. Brown’s work centres on sculptural installations that blend humourous critical engagement with the visual strategies and aesthetics of Pop Art.

Seth Brown’s sculptural installation *Frank* 2024 melds humour and melancholy as he animates a Footy Frank hot dog that is fused to a yellow mustard bottle functioning like an arm endlessly scrolling in search of its elusive loaf of bread. The AI-generated, never-ending bread photos on the phone screen serve as a wry nod to the fraught search for satisfaction in an oversaturated digital world. By anthropomorphising the automaton, Brown presents a cycle of the absurd contemporary, where ‘the feed replenishes itself; the motion persists. Nothing responds.’⁶

Speaking to the unfolding conditions of the digital era, *Frank* is reminiscent of *Tender* 2015, an installation made by four students in a Media and Technology class at Leiden University: Cors Brinkman, Jeroen van Oorschot, Marcello Maureira, and Matei Szabo. *Tender* features a piece of meat attached to a small, motorised machine that endlessly and aggressively swipes on the dating app, Tinder—perpetually swiping right, as if to say ‘yes’. In a similar gesturing to apathy and yearning, the repeated movement of *Frank* feels uncanny, recalling not only the intimate touch of a lover but also the compulsive, Sisyphean gesture of endless doomscrolling.

Frank, like many of us, is both whimsical and tragic, caught in an endless and futile search for connection and meaning. Brown presents the paradox of contemporary life—a world where the very digital tools that promised to connect us have only deepened our sense of isolation. Here, loneliness is linked to a sense of fear, or perhaps failure in not finding a connection.

06 Seth Brown, statement supplied,
12 February 2026.





All images pp. 24-25: Seth Brown, *Frank* 2024
 mixed media sculpture: Oscar Mayer Classic Weiner, mobile device, AI-generated imagery, mustard bottle, hobby motor
 15.2 x 20.3 x 30.5 cm (approx.). Courtesy the artist

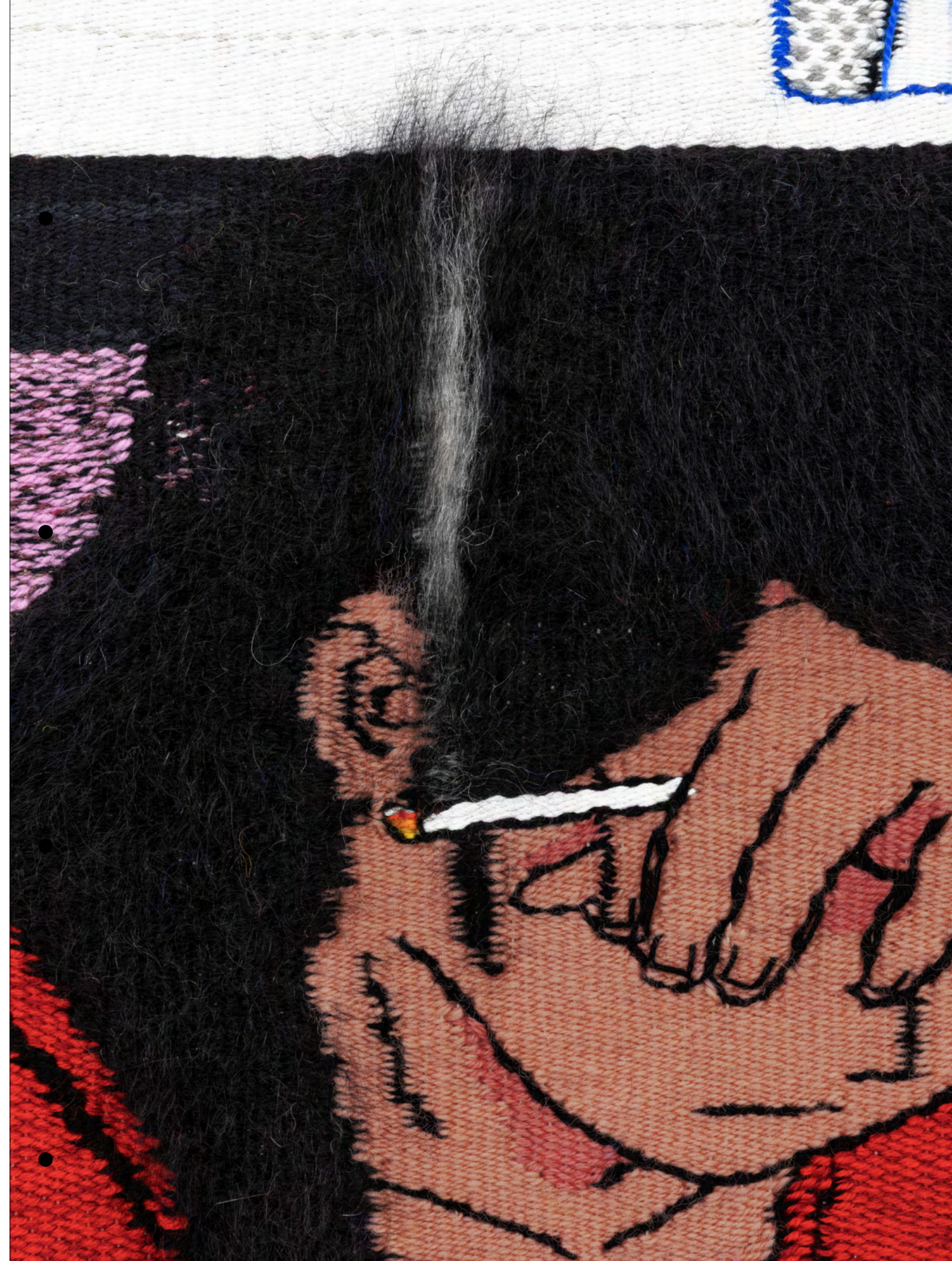


BLACK MIRROR

Similarly to Patrick Pound, Kayla Mattes begins with accumulation. Where Pound gathers physical objects, Mattes collects the flotsam of screen life—screenshots, memes, gifs, search results—the residue of hours spent scrolling alone. Her subject is the particular kind of loneliness that a networked ‘online’ existence produces. Hand-woven over twelve months, the resulting work, *Lonely Planet* 2025–2026, is a seven-metre-wide tapestry that unfolds from left to right, like a horizontal tablet of contemporary hieroglyphs.

Drawing from the internet and feelings of heartbreak for inspiration, each section of the tapestry is densely layered with symbols derived from a shared visual language that represents our connected and disconnected lives. We are presented with tarot cards, the Hermit and the Five of Cups—both symbols of loss, regret, and disappointment—shown in proximity to a scale of ‘Hangryness’ and a gif of an upside down American flag. There is a poll asking, ‘What are you most worried about?’. 2026 internet references include Punch the monkey, who gained internet fame after seeking comfort in a stuffed-toy Orangutang from Ikea, upon being rejected by his mother, and is here rendered with three-dimensionality bearing long tufted hair. On the right side of the composition is a Lonely Planet ad that proclaims ‘The World. Just One Click Away’, and nearby, the nihilistic penguin meme accurately depicts the penguin poised before running into the abyss. Beneath the penguin is a screenshot that reads ‘Resume your journey’, and above it, white text asks, ‘But why?’ The dark humour within and across Mattes’ work leads me to think of Kuku/Erub/Mer contemporary artist, Destiny Deacon, who described her work as having a laugh and a tear in every picture. Like Mattes, Deacon would deliberately use humour to disarm her audience, often sharing that she liked to ‘make people laugh, because that way they didn’t feel the knife go in’.

By rendering screen culture in thread, Mattes sets two registers in tension: the handmade and the disposable, the slow and the instantaneous. This interplay heightens the way *Lonely Planet* shifts between the playful and the tragic, and that one’s reading of the work is contingent on their own emotional state and experience. In this way, *Lonely Planet* also carries echoes of the great medieval tapestries such as the *Lady and the unicorn* c. 1500, where its meaning changes based on the viewer’s perspective. Those fluent in the coded vernacular of networked life will likely find more to unpack; for others, the work may read more overarchingly (or perhaps, overwhelmingly) as a dense, chaotic landscape of contemporary heartbreak.



Kayla Mattes, *Lonely Planet* 2025–2026 handwoven cotton, wool (hand-dyed), mohair, faux fur, silk, acrylic, polyester, beads, 130.0 x 655.0 cm (approx.). Courtesy the artist. Supported in part by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026 Photo: Moe Wakai

The intersection between the digital and the physical is also poignantly articulated through the work of Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Hine, Samoan, Pākehā woman and Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland-based artist Natasha Matila-Smith. Matila-Smith’s installation is shown in a pink-lit room, anchored by a bed; the latter, a nod to Tracey Emin’s *My bed* 1998, but in Matila-Smith’s presentation, the bed is without autobiographical detritus. Instead, it is made up of common comforts including a clean duvet, fluffy pillows, and a single, glowing laptop that plays her video work, *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud* 2019.

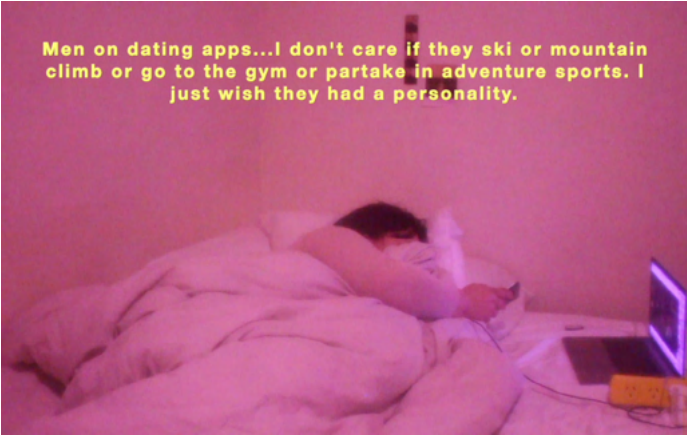
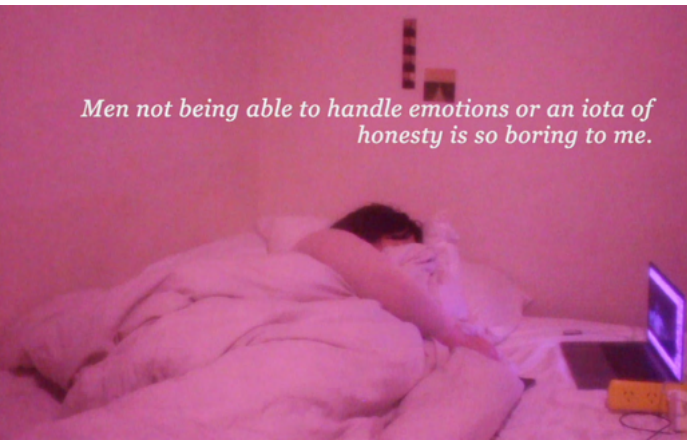
The setting is intended to heighten the claustrophobic yet disembodied quality that runs through much of Matila-Smith’s practice. *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud* centres on a faceless, sleepless protagonist who tosses and turns—also in a pink-lit room—caught between the glow of a phone and a laptop. The slow accumulation of self-doubt in her thoughts rises through sequences of confessional text messages. Enveloped by her bedding—her face barely visible—she seems to dissolve into the bed itself.

If I die, please delete my Soundcloud depicts what has become known as ‘bed rotting’. Popularised in recent years by Gen Z on social media, the term describes the act of retreating into one’s bed for long stretches as an escape symptomatic of contemporary malaise. ‘Bed rotting’ is the tendency that Emin’s *My bed* so personally captured in the late-1990s, and it has since become such a phenomenon in the wake of pandemic-era social withdrawal that the term was shortlisted as Oxford’s Word of the Year in 2023. Like doomscrolling—that compulsive behaviour Seth Brown’s *Frank* enacts with such bleak precision—bed rotting offers the illusion of comfort while signaling a kind of nihilistic surrender. Both are ways of staying still while the world continues without you. Time loses its shape; days fold into one another; the line between rest and resignation becomes impossible to find.

SUFFOCATION

Originally presented in 2019, the 2026 installation of *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud* invites the audience to step inside the work by climbing into bed. Like the myth of Eurydice—trapped in an underworld where light and time have no meaning—Matila-Smith prompts us to actively consider modes that suspend our sense of time in our post-pandemic digital underworlds. Her words speak to a loneliness that is not only defined by absence, but by the endless, mediated presence of digital connection that coddles us, for better or for worse.

*If I die, don't worry about the porn, it's tasteful...
just delete my Soundcloud
My loneliness is manageable but I think I am just a bit
tired of doing things on my own
I just wanna be spooned
2 UGLY 2 DATE ... lol
I leave my laptop running all night long because it
makes me feel less alone.*



In the pink-hued gallery space, Matila-Smith’s installation is shown alongside a series of sculptures by Polly Borland. Through the artist’s process of observing the way materials layer over a human form until the original shape is both present and obscured, Borland’s bulbous, fleshy and seemingly soft sculptures hover between the bodily and the unrecognisable. Shown with a suite of smaller sculptures informed by this same process, *BOD* 2023 is a larger than life-size sculpture where the human form within remains just visible beneath the accumulated mass. The sculptures viscerally convey the experience of being weighed down, not only by loneliness, but by the many feelings that press on the body—grief, anxiety, nervous exhaustion—and the slow psychosomatic distortion that can occur through a life lived under pressure.

Presented in dialogue with *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud*, Borland’s sculptures read as figures that have dissolved so fully into their bedding that body and bed have become one. Marked by a sense of deformation and weight; the forms feel at once alien and familiar. In this uneasy hybridity, Borland’s work becomes a physical manifestation of loneliness and longing, where the body is rendered unfamiliar by the very things meant to soothe it.



Polly Borland, *BOD* 2023. MONUMENTS at Marfa Invitational Foundation, May 2023 – May 2024, Marfa, TX. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Image Credit: Chris Roque, Nino Mier Gallery



Polly Borland, *Toothy* 2025 pigmented cast resin with polished finish, 61.0 x 19.9 x 17.3 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Photo: Phil Huynh

In a time marked by fragmentation and isolation, a restless search for meaning and a reckoning with irony finds expression in the works of Melbourne-based artists Callum McGrath and Nick Mullally. In their own ways, their new commissions for *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.* document and interpret club culture, creating records that extend beyond the ephemeral nature of the events themselves. Their nuanced works challenge the perception of such spaces as frivolous or insignificant, positioning them instead as important cultural phenomena. Both artists draw on the nightclub as a charged site where loneliness, desire, and fleeting connection collide, yet, their approaches diverge, capturing two sides of the same nocturnal coin.

The Peel, Sircuit, and Miscellania are three iconic Melbourne clubs where painter, Nick Mullaly has found solace on the dance floor, and in his new works he dually intellectualises and celebrates his experiences with them—experiences that are shared by many. The luminosity of his large-scale paintings depicting scenes from within and outside the clubs, reifies these gathering spaces to an almost spiritual plane, for they are sites where culture, community, enlightenment and value systems can thrive; attuning the inner worlds of those who attend them, and shaping the way they relate to the world outside.

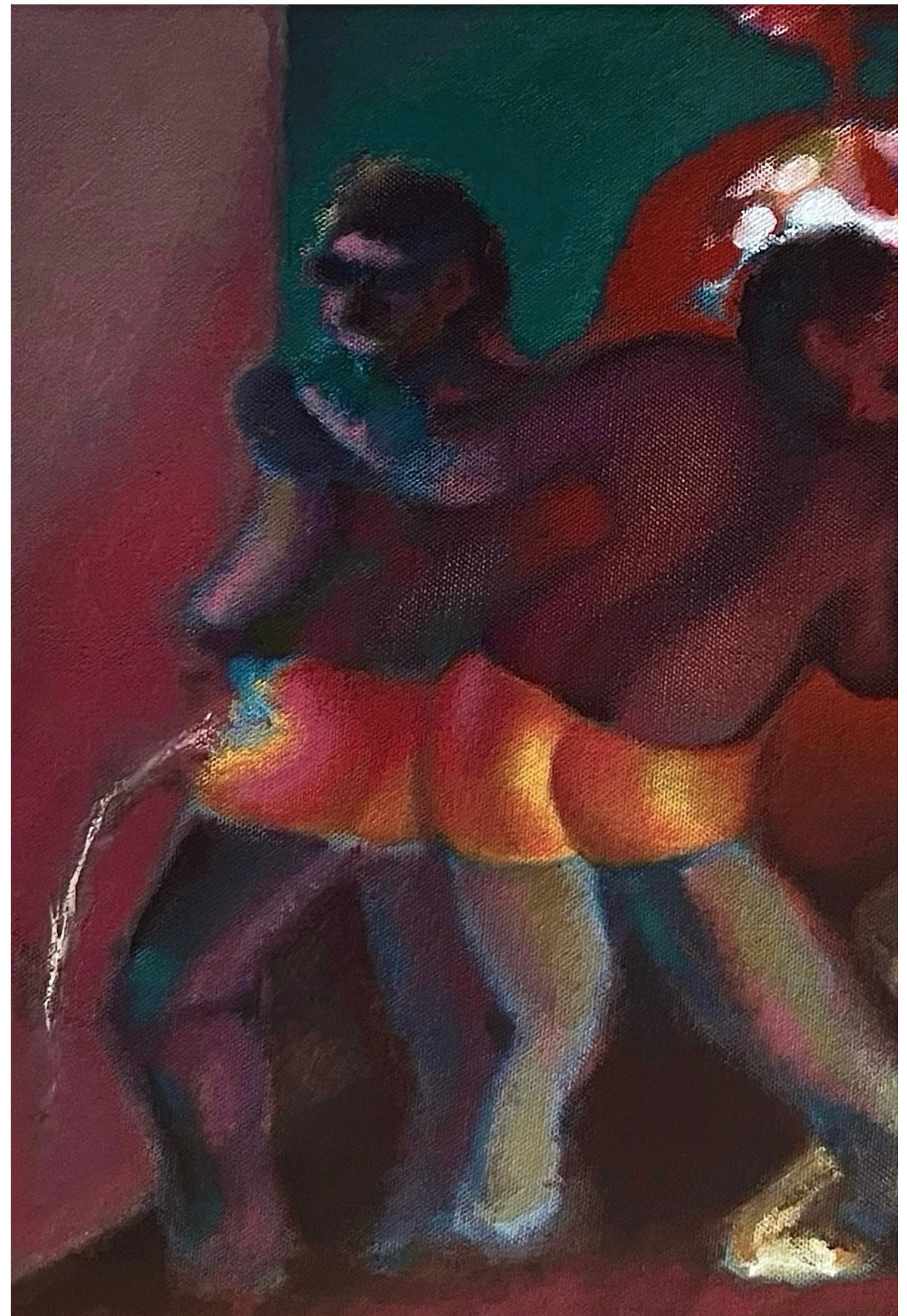
While working on the series, Mullaly reflected on memories of when he came to frequent these queer-friendly clubs and their respective club nights, such as Confide at Miscellania, named in homage to Kylie Minogue’s 1994 indie pop classic *Confide in Me*. In the wake of a breakup and the isolation of COVID-19 lockdowns, Mullaly found solidarity on the dance floor. By resisting the routine of staying home, he began venturing out with friends or alone, taking a chance on an uncharted night out that often resulted in making friends along the way. In the face of the unknown, the safety of queer spaces restored his sense of faith and agency, affirming the value in freedom of expression. True to his experience, his series of small-scale paintings do not dwell on the peak of the party, but in the potential of quieter, unexpected moments—friends and strangers waiting on the street, lingering in the smokers’ area or gazing fondly at a dancefloor from a distance. By flattening pictorial depth as well as using windows and frames to divide the picture plane, Mullaly suspends his figures in in-between spaces, together, yet apart.

Such gathering spaces may at times be judged for enabling hedonism and indulgence, but the luminosity of Mullaly’s paintings belies its undertow. Mullaly’s personal choice to seek out belonging in scenes that celebrate differences, and where others may also be meeting in loneliness, highlights how these spaces can erode the solitude or shame that loneliness produces. In a world where there is still not socio-political equity for LGBTIQ+ communities, and more broadly there is a push for individuals to ‘constantly inhabit peak states’,⁷ it is not a surprise that there is not universal understanding of how and where to recon with our complex inner worlds. Liang observes that in the city ‘loneliness feels like such a shameful experience, so counter to the lives we are supposed to lead, that it becomes increasingly inadmissible, a taboo state whose confession seems destined to cause others to turn and flee’.⁸ But the dance floor does not turn and flee.



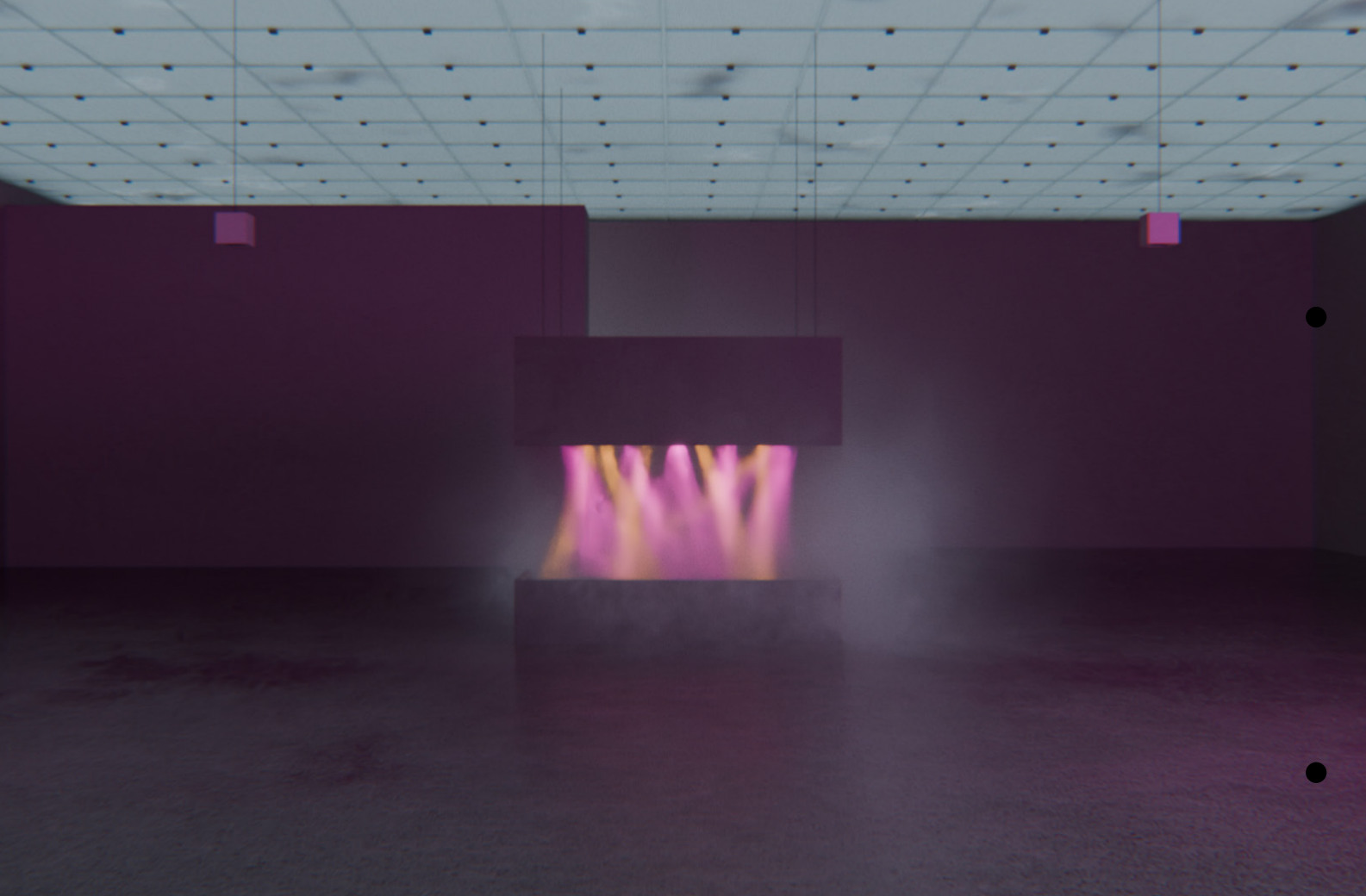


Nick Mullaly, *Second wind* 2026 (detail) oil on canvas, 36.0 x 46.5 cm
 Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

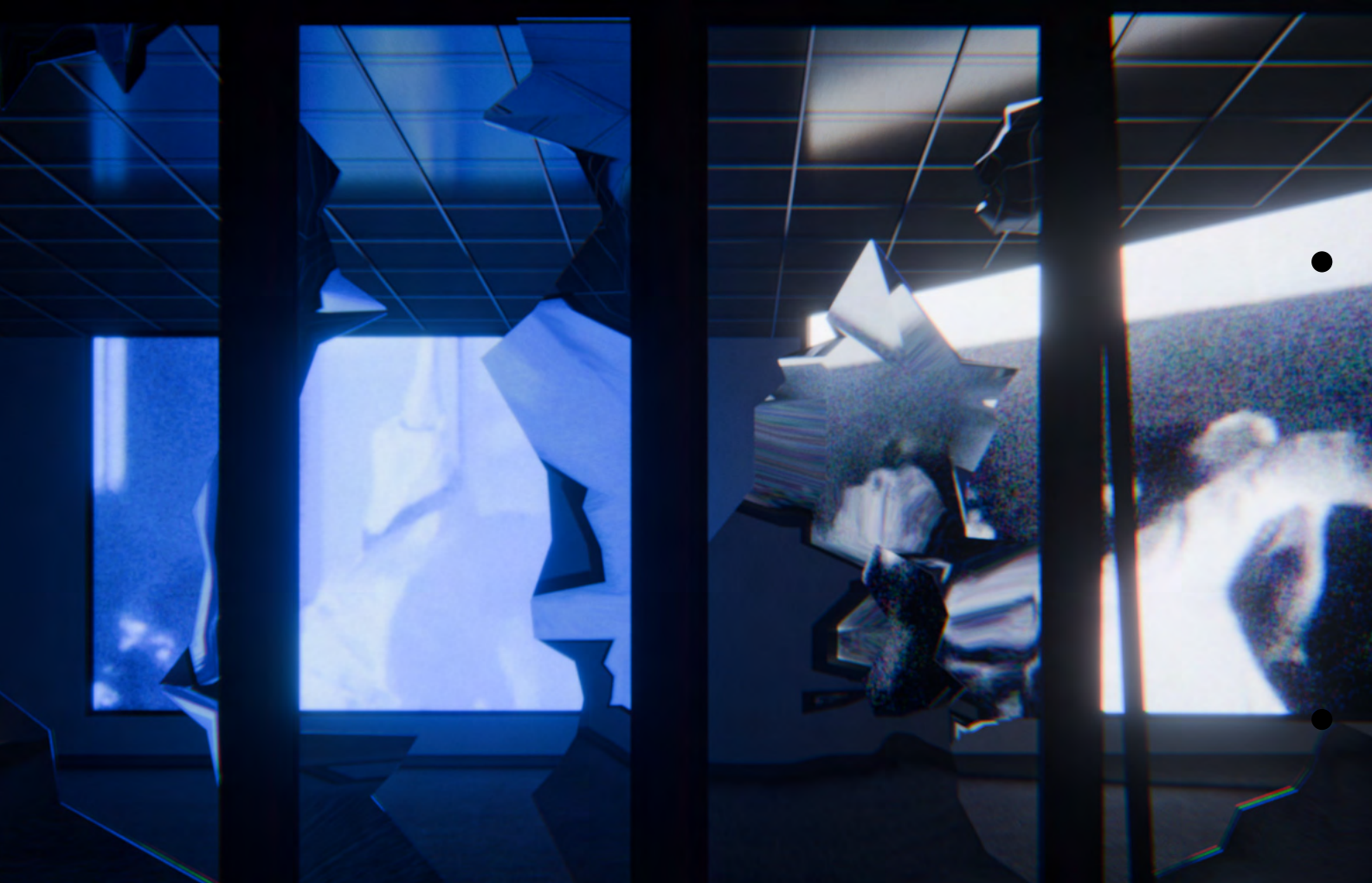


Nick Mullaly, *Key apparition* 2026 (detail) oil on canvas, 36.0 x 46.5 cm
 Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026





All images: Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026



Where Mullaly memorialises the club, Callum McGrath turns his attention to the transformative elements of what happens inside them, and beyond. His two-channel video installation, *What's after this?* 2026, implicates the viewer onto the dance floor as a living, breathing environment that is dually collective and subjective; literal and philosophical. McGrath has compiled footage captured over three years into a single channel video. In contrast, the second channel features an animated loop showcasing various unnamed club venues throughout Melbourne. Installed on a two-sided, freestanding projection screen that is flanked by the same trusses you would find at a club or festival stage, the video work is in direct dialogue with the darkened club-like environment, complete with moody lighting and a haze machine.

What's after this? conjures a space that is neither purely real, nor purely imagined. What emerges is less a record than a texture: the feeling of being inside a crowd, surrounded by bodies and sound, while remaining, somewhere beneath it all, alone. This tension between togetherness and isolation has a long history for artists. The Impressionists were among the first to paint the modern crowd not as a unified mass but as a collection of separate, inward-facing individuals. McGrath's work can be considered in a similar register and goes further by directly referencing in the animation component impactful artworks that have specifically grappled with the phenomenon of club culture and the dualities of a crowd.

As a new commission, the contemporary dance floors depicted in *What's after this?* speak to our current moment. The work not only documents multiple specific sites, club communities, and local and international creatives, but also the mediating presence of technology. Smart phones feature throughout the work, at times in almost comical abundance, 'a sea of mediation'⁹, as the artist put in conversation. It indexes the reality of these spaces as being at once intensely collective and intensely subjective, whether mediated by a phone or the senses. Through this tension there builds a sense of rippling within the work; a sense that every action creates a new fragmentation of one's consciousness that becomes forever implicated within the unfurling universe.

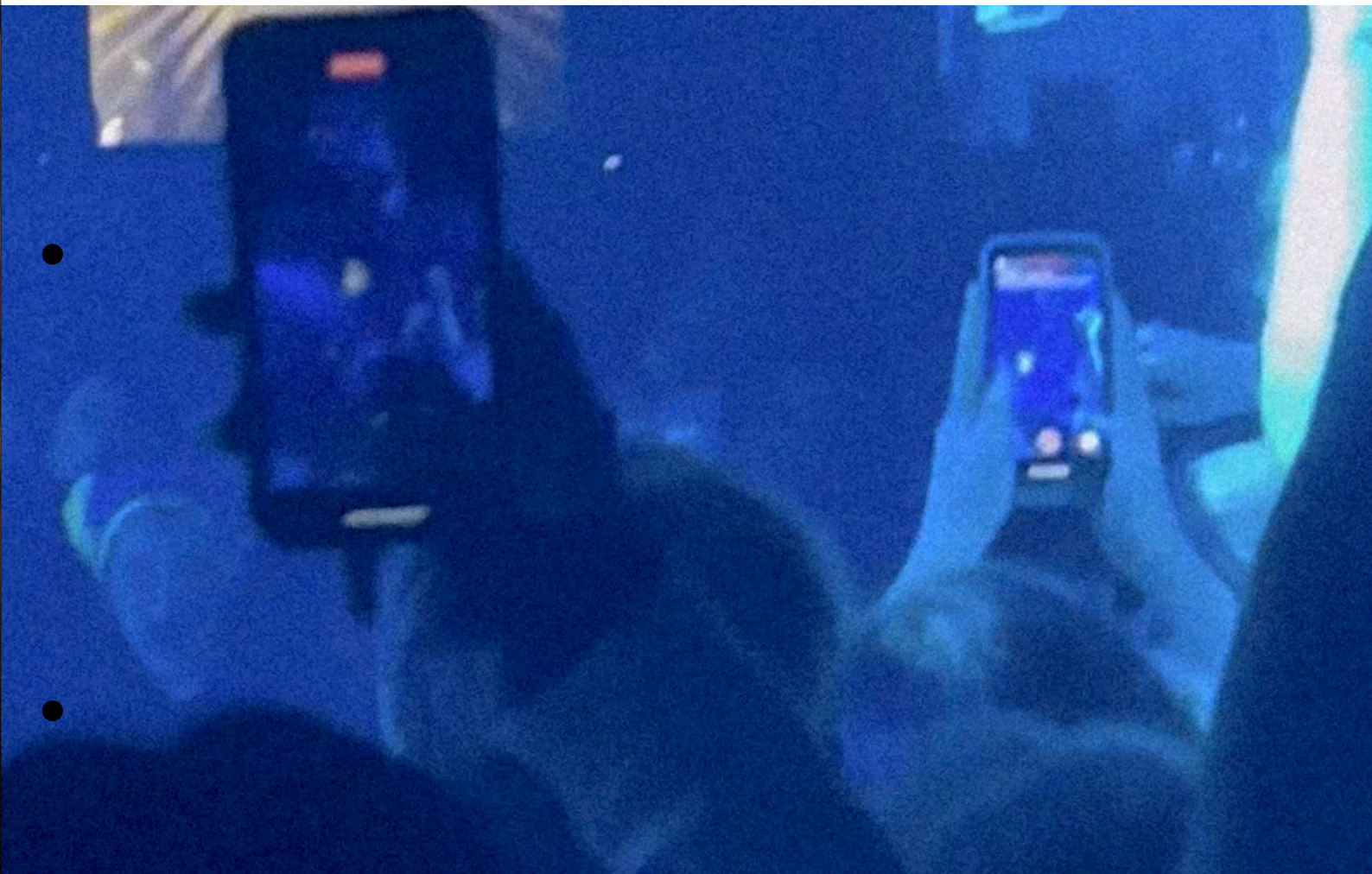
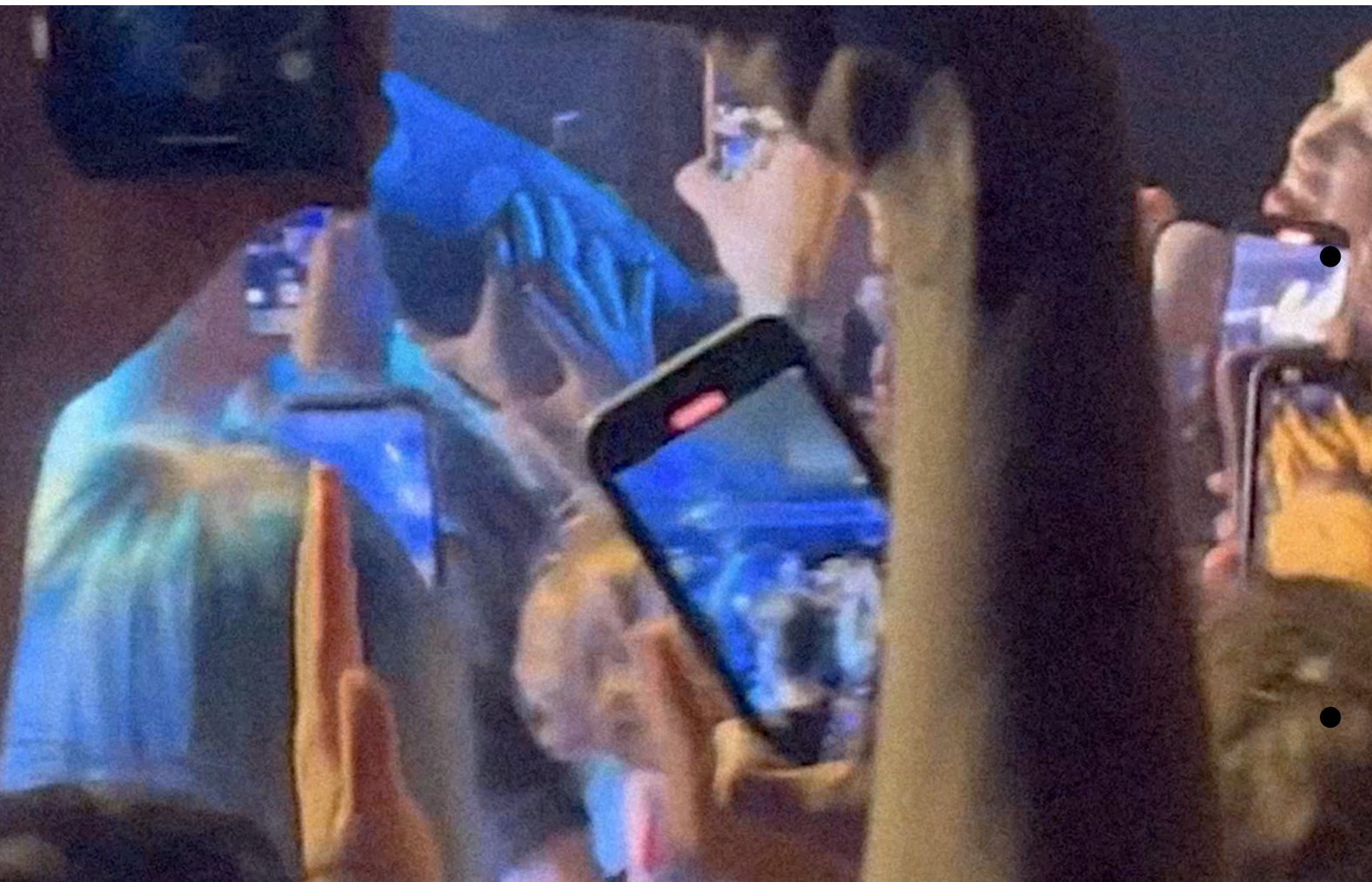
The dually complex yet humble notion that everything is networked—from time to technology, the dance floor to the dirt—is also alluded to through McGrath's unmistakable reference to Pierre Huyghe's ex *L'Expédition Scintillante, Act 2 (light show)* 2002 that mesmerisingly explores these themes. *What's after this?* pushes into meta realms by taking the club context as both its subject and form, as well as in this apt reference to Huyghe's work. Amelia Barakin describes Huyghe's work; 'this small, cubic structure was illuminated by a display of orange and pink lights that dappled the fog from its internal smoke machine. The light show was accompanied by a soundtrack of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* (1888), as orchestrated by Claude Debussy. *Untitled (Light Show)* was a domesticated, emptied-out version of the psychedelic spectacles staged during acid rock concerts in the late 1960s and early 1970s... These pieces illuminated a void—an exposition of emptiness—through a distortion of utopian tropes'.¹⁰ Not to be mistaken for a simple homage, McGrath reflexively highlights and perpetuates the continuum of art, music, human relations and technology as they unfold into the ultimate continuum of nature. For McGrath legacies of recurrent ideas are a devine insight into the throughlines of the human and universal connection.

- 09 Callum McGrath quoted in interview with curator, Sophie Prince, 1 April 2026.
- 10 Amelia Barakin, *Parallel Presents: The Art of Pierre Huyghe*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 131. Barakin continues; 'It was here that Huyghe's music box from "L'Expédition scintillante" was placed, with its foggy trails of colored light spilling over the sides of the miniature stage. The echoes of Giorgio's dream talk encroached on the play of light and music. At the center of the stage flickered a void. The epitaph to Huyghe's retrospective was a hallucinatory afterglow of emptiness. There was no suggestion here as to the suspension of disbelief'.



All images: Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

All images: Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026



Although depicting both the live and the mediated, McGrath does not hierarchise, but reveals both lenses as shaping reality. In this way, he highlights that there are always layers of translation, inviting the viewer to feel the pull of collective experience while remaining conscious of their own separateness. To be in *What’s after this?* is to understand that being together and being alone are not opposites; they can be the same thing.

LONELY CHILD, FATHER AND MOTHER

I know the duality of being alone while *technically* with others, when I think back to my childhood. Although my parents love me, I remember harbouring feelings of loneliness that I would now describe as the fear that my existence was an interruption. Other than being gay and in the closet, I do not know exactly why I had such persistent feelings of loneliness as a child, other than that perhaps childhood is just an inherently lonely time in anyone’s life.

My parents divorced when I was very young, and my relationship with my dad has always been complicated. He is an only child, but he often described himself as a ‘lonely’ child. He later worked as a veterinarian, and growing up I observed how he was able to perform empathy with animals that calmed even the most frightened clients, but at home, I found him private and out of reach. Perhaps our shared sense of loneliness is what has made it so difficult for us to truly connect.

Some of my earliest memories are of sitting alone in his clinic with unwell or dying animals—mostly cats, who are known to instinctively isolate themselves at the end of life. Bearing witness to so many private moments of animal solitude and death taught me so much that I have remained fascinated by death ever since.

When I was about thirteen, my dad traveled to Antarctica. I remember how excited he was about seeing penguins, though he only saw one. Even now, I do not fully understand why he went (he is a private person), and I wonder if his privacy is just another form of coping with his loneliness. When we experience trauma, we might become boundaryless in rage, or we might become walled up in privacy and isolation. There is a myriad of ways to process our emotions.

Looking back on my own childhood, I think that is perhaps why I now identify so much with the nihilistic penguin in Herzog’s film, understanding, at least on an emotional level, the urge to run away. But humans are not penguins, nor are we cats; most of us are social creatures, built to rely on one another for survival.

As a teenager, I volunteered in a dementia ward for the very elderly. The contrast between animals and humans was striking. In the care facility, people often died alone by circumstance, rather than by instinct or choice, as many residents had few or no family visitors. They were mostly very lonely. I would spend time with them, sometimes returning to find an empty, neatly made bed.

I have been stirred again by these experiences while thinking about solitude at the end of life. I can see that for some—like myself—in a world where loneliness and solitude exist, art becomes a refuge, a way to reach beyond isolation and feel a connection to something greater.

Melissa Nguyen considers personal and collective experiences to explore memory, displacement, and cultural inheritance within the Vietnamese diaspora. Her paintings are compelled by the absence of family photographs documenting her mother’s life before she came to Australia. The only image she has of her mother from that time is one taken in Indonesia at the Galang Island Refugee Camp in the 1970s, when her mother would have been between twelve and fourteen years old, after fleeing Vietnam with one of her brothers and his family. This camp, which is now a tourist site, marked a pivotal chapter in her mother’s journey before she was sponsored to move to Australia and eventually settled in Adelaide, where Nguyen was born.

Responding to this absence, Nguyen creates presence through a series of six restrained, white-on-white canvases painted with rabbit-skin glue. This new series builds on her earlier diptych, *Royal Bloodlines* and *The Last Great Dynasty* 2025. In these companion paintings, Nguyen paired a photograph of a royal concubine from the Imperial Citadel in Huế, Vietnam, with a self-portrait where she is holding a similar pose and wearing a contemporary áo dài, linking historical and personal narratives.

After years living alone in Melbourne, Nguyen began to see her parents—especially her mother—as individuals with their own histories and complexities. Letter writing became a way for her to reconnect, framing her reflections on loneliness as a route to understanding and empathy. Through her new commission, realised as three large-scale diptychs, Nguyen deftly moves between personal and universal experiences of memory, displacement, and belonging.



Documentation of letters between
Melissa Nguyen and her mother.
Courtesy the artist



All images pp. 47-49: Melissa Nguyen, *A letter to my mother; A letter to your mother* 2026 (detail)
rabbit skin glue on canvas. 3 diptychs, 250.0 x 175.0 cm each
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026



Contemporary artist and multihyphenate Lucy Liu turns to painting to explore her relationship with her mother and the ways family and sociocultural systems shape our identities. Liu’s parents emigrated from Beijing and Shanghai to Taiwan before meeting while attending university in New York in the 1960s. Arriving in the United States without fluency in the language or an established support network, they carried both the resilience and sacrifice of displacement. Through her work, Liu reflects on the strength required to ‘begin again’, while also acknowledging the isolation and emotional distance that migration can leave behind.

Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry. includes three key paintings from Liu’s *Shunga* series 2006–2008 that make visible the private inner lives of her fictionalised characters. Shunga is a form of Japanese erotic art, best known through *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Liu was first drawn to shunga for its overt expression of sexuality, a contrast to the air of secrecy around sex and the body that she recalls growing up. Unlike the delicate details found in historical shunga, Liu’s versions are large and expressive. Her loose, gestural brushstrokes give the work its energy, turning scenes of private sexuality into public, declarative statements.

As the youngest of three children growing up in New York, Liu recalls a home where modesty was encouraged. For example, she vividly remembers her mother covering herself when she walked in on her while changing, even when she was already dressed. In Liu’s work, these memories are transformed into metaphors, the act of opening or closing a kimono symbolising the push and pull that occurs between our private and public selves. She explores the thin line between what is hidden and what is shared, inviting us to reflect on how our private and public selves might shape who we are and how we connect with others.

Although Liu has explored a wide range of spiritual traditions throughout her life, including Buddhism, Taoism, and Kabbalah, she was not raised with any formal religion. As a child, she recalls going to church with a neighbour, fascinated by the shared rituals yet always feeling like an observer; not having been baptised, she watched from the outside. This experience of being almost-but-not-quite inside a community has stayed with her, and it runs through her art: the way belonging and exclusion can exist in the same space.

Art was a source of comfort during Liu’s childhood, helping her to transform loneliness into something creative. Throughout the 1990s, as her practice evolved, she often exhibited under her Chinese name, Yu Ling. During this time, she happily spent long hours alone in her studio. As her public profile grew, her experience with solitude shifted into knowing both the anonymity of working unseen, and the strange loneliness of fame: being recognised by people who *think* they know you, when, really, they just know *about* you. At the heart of Liu’s enduring practice is a search for meaning, what she describes as, ‘looking for your birthplace within yourself’.¹¹

¹¹ Lucy Liu quoted in interview with curator, Myles Russell-Cook, New York, January 2025.



Lucy Liu, *Moi Et Les Autres* 2008
acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 218.4 cm. Courtesy the artist



Lucy Liu, *En Cachette* 2008
acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 210.8 cm. Courtesy the artist

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT?

Loneliness is universal; it doesn't belong to people alone. I know that my dog gets lonely. I do not need science to confirm it; I can see it in her eyes when I leave for work, one living being to another. Animal studies have, however, confirmed the severe consequences of isolation, perhaps most notoriously in Harry Harlow's 1950s experiments with rhesus monkeys that revealed companionship to be as influential on behaviour as hunger.¹²

Growing up, my family watched a lot of Star Trek. I can recall at least ten episodes featuring a 'last of their kind' alien, but Google tells me there were several more. I was always drawn to those episodes, and when we played dress-up in the schoolyard, I imagined myself as the last of my kind. A visitor from another planet, who was the last of her or his species, and whose whole world was defined by their 'aloneness'.

I loved the Talaxians in Voyager, who were functionally extinct. I loved Odo from Deep Space Nine, so far away from his species that he might as well have been the last, and of course, I loved Seven of Nine.

Seven of Nine was a character played by Jeri Ryan, who, as a little girl, was assimilated by cyborgs called the Borg Collective, and later being 'severed' from the hive mind, became both the first and last of her kind. She was a unique fusion of her own human individuality and that of the reclaimed Borg consciousness. Suspended between species, her character inspired my enduring fascination with extinction.

I once wrote about the artist Percy Leason in the 1930s, focusing on a story about 'Benjamin', the last known Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger). During the 1930s, my Aboriginal ancestors were also widely described as 'dying out'. The study of Aboriginal people was shaped by what is known as salvage anthropology, the belief that urgent documentation was needed because Indigenous cultures were presumed to be vanishing.

Those who are the last of their kind are sometimes called endlings or terminarchs.¹³ If extinction has any lessons, perhaps it is that life is fragile.

12 See H. F. Harlow, 'The nature of love', *American Psychologist*, 13, vol. 12, pp. 673-85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0047884> [accessed 23 April 2026]. In this experiment, infant monkeys were separated from their mothers and given surrogate mothers made of wire or cloth, leading to profound psychological distress. Harlow's research exposed the devastating effects of social isolation on any species.

13 Terminarch is derived from the Latin *terminus*, meaning 'end', and the Greek *archos*, meaning 'one who rules or stands at the beginning'.



Lucy Liu, *Je Suis. Envois-Moi.* 2008
acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 186.7 cm. Courtesy the artist

Contemplating the last species, entity or human has inspired the work of many artists including John Gerhard’s *Endling (Martha)* 2021, Nicholas Hovington’s *Bounty* 2017, Hugh Hayden’s *The End* 2022, Hannah Brontë’s *Umma’s Tongue – molten at 6000°* 2017, and Emilija Škarnulytė’s *Aqualia* 2023. Swedish-born, New Orleans-raised writer and director Kelly Yu continues in this legacy through her filmic work, *Endling* 2024.

Presented as a cozy home-viewing—the film screened on a vintage television to be viewed from a classic Chesterfield couch, with a fish tank containing a single, wide-eyed goldfish just around the corner—the installation parodies the passive and even bizzare ways in which we digest even the most alarming news. *Endling* is a fictional documentary-style short film about the last remaining goldfish who is tended to by a lone, devoted caretaker.

Yu’s practice often blends genres, using satire and the absurd to explore isolation and companionship. The absurdist narrative of *Endling* invites us to consider not only the fate of the goldfish but also humanity’s own vulnerability: how unforeseen disaster and isolation will one day threaten our own existence as a species.

I’M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

At this moment the Doomsday Clock, maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, sits perilously close to midnight. In knowing its existence, I wonder whether facing our own annihilation as a species changes our sense of connection, care, and responsibility? Perhaps the answer is in our collective (in)action towards the melting icecaps and a genocide unfolding in real time.

Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry. is no doomsday clock. It is an exhibition that brings together work that reflects and offers productive spaces to reckon with the depths of our inner and outer experiences. Life goes around the Doomsday Clock, whereas art asks to pause and to feel before continuing on.

When I am with art, I feel this distinction. Even just briefly, I’m reminded I am not alone; something shifts inside, and a thread is cast out into the world. Art reveals that others are reaching out too. In this way, art can heal loneliness—offering a space for recognition, understanding, and hope.



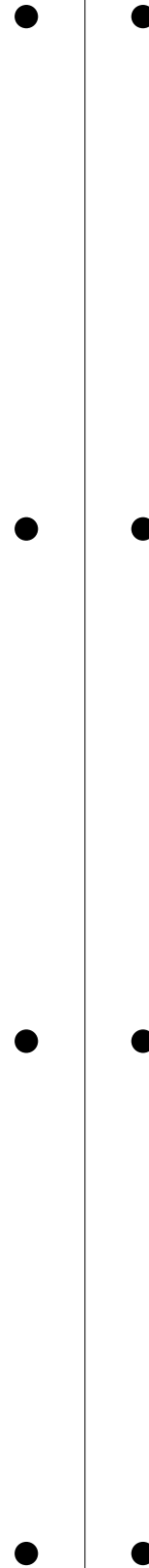
All images: Kelly Yu, *Endling* 2024 (still)
short film, 15:00 mins. Courtesy the artist





Opposite: Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026 (still)
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

ALONE TOGETHER



SOPHIE PRINCE

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

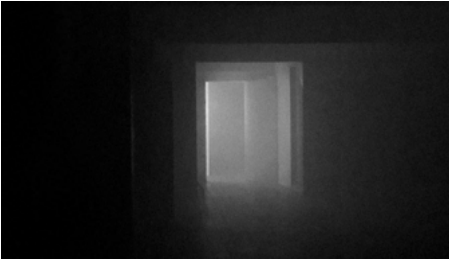
Sometimes loneliness swallows me. Time becomes slippery; days and nights blur together as if I was sleep walking.

–Katie Paine¹

Reflecting on the feeling of loneliness while on working on *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, I was brought back to the COVID-19 lockdowns in Melbourne when we languished for days, months and years that blurred together, a sacrifice to protect the physical health of our community, united under the flag of ‘alone together’. Although I was lucky to live in a share-house with three friends at the time, the silent, private and internal workings of this mysterious emotion became more apparent than ever. Loneliness does not need solitude to thrive and despite it being a common emotion, it seems to produce and feed off a sense of shame, an observation that recalls Carl Jung’s understanding that ‘loneliness does not come from having no people around, but from being unable to communicate things that seem important to you’.² I sense the resonance of this framework for understanding the invisible plague of loneliness in many of the works brought together for this project. I was at once surprised and validated to read Beau Newham’s essay for the publication that also recalled the heightened circumstances of the pandemic to describe the wake of the AIDS epidemic and its lonely legacy. He describes; ‘Talking about HIV and AIDS in the early 2000s felt similar to the experience of talking about COVID-19 now; both conversations are often met with a vague exhaustion and a wilfulness to forget about the hard times’.³ Today, the compulsion to shake off the hard times all too often finds its home in passive escapism or silence, but many works in the exhibition, such as Melbourne artists Nick Mullaly and Callum McGrath whose new commissions, respectively, reveal and reify alternative spaces to process the loneliness that persists without the strange benefit of visibility granted by an acute crisis.

Throughout lockdowns, my housemates and I were switched on to the many less fortunate, such as those who lived alone experiencing unhealthy stretches of isolation; the teens confined to online worlds; and the elderly or immunocompromised cut off from regular visitation. We were grateful for our relative safety and privilege, but it is important to recognise when understanding loneliness that comparison can adversely perpetuate shame and negate processing feelings. The collapsing together of collective lockdowns and increasing neoliberalisation of individuals became a pressure cooker for rising cases of loneliness.⁴ These statistics prompted intense discussions around the effects of loneliness on mental and physical health; definitively revealing links to mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, the development of dementia, high blood pressure and impaired immune function. Despite records of loneliness decreasing to pre-pandemic numbers in subsequent years, awareness of the conditions and consequences of loneliness remain a widely understood public health concern. This rising attention has marked an important shift in recognising, and treating with tenderness, the loneliness of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Olivia Liang observes, ‘you can be lonely anywhere’,⁵ and the scope of *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*—across the exhibition and catalogue—is evidence of this; bringing together international creatives, diverse ways of creating, and expansive yet also specific



All images: Callum McGrath, *What’s after this?* 2026 (still) two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum) Courtesy the artist Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

01 Katie Paine, ‘The Night Watch’, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026, p. 75.

02 Carl Jung, *Memories Dreams and Reflections*, 1963. p. 356. https://archive.org/details/MemoriesDreamsReflectionsCarlJung_201811/mode/2up [accessed 27 April 2026].

03 Beau Newham, ‘Plaques’, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026, p. 86.

04 According to the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, in 2023 an estimated 15% of Australians aged 15 and over were experiencing social isolation (17% of males and 13% of females). Compared with just before the pandemic (13% in 2019), the proportion of all people experiencing social isolation increased to 16% by 2021 but decreased for most age groups in the following years. The exception was the 35–44 age group where the proportion continued to rise, increasing from 16% in 2021 to 18% in 2023. For more information see the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare website. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/health-wellbeing/social-isolation-and-loneliness> [accessed 28 March 2026].

05 Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Canongate Books, London, 2017, p. 26.

06 Judy Annear, ‘home’, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026, p. 92.

07 Bridget Thompson, ‘That Ship is Sure to Wait: Cassandra and the lonely woman’, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026. pp. 77–81.

08 Ibid, p. 79.

09 Katie Paine, email to the curators Sophie Prince and Myles Russelk-Cook, 22 March 2026. ‘Historical depictions of the maritime sublime are relocated into the contemporary experience of reproductive loss, medical surveillance, suburban interiors, and coastal walking paths. Moving between the shoreline of a windswept bay and moments of medical uncertainty, the work borrows from Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to think through the doldrums as both a geographic and psychological condition’.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

references that together reflect the situational nuances and textures of loneliness. Loneliness reveals itself as a close friend to dissonance, its dissonance to what exactly produces variations and visceral details to the work it inspires—whether a painting, an academic paper, a play, or an Instagram post. The astuteness of creators can be quite alarming for the way they reify what many diminish as too insignificant or irrelevant to share. I have had the pleasure of reframing my own moments of loneliness or practices of mitigating loneliness through the process of working on this exhibition and publication. Tendencies I had given little conceptual airtime—urges to bed rot, seek out nature, go clubbing or weep over a poem, for example—have found their profundity or voice of reason through the artwork and writing of others. Judy Annear’s *home*, a poem commissioned for this publication, comes to mind as I reflect on how the work of the eleven exhibiting artists and eight commissioned writers have come to help me understand myself. To access the life and legacy of artists’ work, Annear proposes, ‘prepare to receive yourself’.⁶

The subjective yet resonant experience of loneliness is perhaps what lends this emotional register to being laboured over time, place and medium. It can find its form in precise retellings of lived experience and equally between the lines of poetry or sculpture. Bridget Thompson’s text for the exhibition exacts the ancient yet enduring loneliness of the unbelieved woman, eternalised by the Greek mythology of Cassandra.⁷ Her legacy is shown to transcend from mythology to pathology as Thompson surveys how Cassandra’s story extends inspiring plays and Pop songs to informing psychology—namely the condition termed ‘Cassandra Syndrome’.⁸ The potency of Cassandra’s story seems to find longevity through the irony of her own voice not being effective while acting as vessel for many, particularly women, to articulate their experience.

The difficulty and efficacy of voicing is also at the heart of Katie Paine’s creative text. Paine evokes the loneliness of a woman who has miscarried and her expanded meditation on connections lost is inspired by her research into maritime history and sustained coastal observation to ‘examine states of waiting, suspension, and failed communication’.⁹ Paine’s research powerfully conflates grief and watchkeeping, noticing, ‘lighthouses, telegraph cables, ultrasound monitors, and migratory birds recur as imperfect signaling systems—attempt[ing] to bridge distance, predict loss, or make sense of silence’.¹⁰ Within her text this conflation manifests as the protagonist’s dissonance with the persistent pace of the world despite being anchored by grief. Paine conjures the mother’s specific inner world as ‘flickers of rage that no one else quite shares my sorrow, that the world meanders onwards’.¹¹

I ponder the many who may have felt that same flicker for their own reason or found their voice through someone else’s story. I sense glimmers of such personal yet ultimately shared feelings of dissonance throughout *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.* From the resigned sensibility of Polly Borland’s larger than life sculpture *BOD* 2023, which seems laden by weight of the world; to the dizzying or disillusioning effects from the glut of online content, conveyed through Kayla Mattes’ weaving or the video work of Natasha Matila-Smith; and in the quiet yearning for intergenerational and cultural connection that is touched upon in the paintings of Melissa Nguyen as well as Lucy Liu. Although the

exhibition invites meeting in loneliness, navigating its fraught terrain through art importantly departs from its legacy of shame and privacy to instead openly embrace the tragic, the humorous and the human, offering you a space to see and be seen.

Amidst the glossiness of late capitalism, we are fed the notion that all difficult feeling–depression, anxiety, loneliness, rage–are simply a consequence of unsettled chemistry, a problem to be fixed, rather than a response to structural injustice.

–Olivia Laing¹²

It is understandable that the endless scroll of the internet is a recurring gesture in *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.* for it connotes the irony of our current condition–limitless connection yet, loneliness persists. The gesture features in Seth Brown’s *Frank* 2024 and Kayla Mattes’ new commission *Lonely Planet* 2025–2026, it is also implied within Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Hine, Samoan and Pākehā artist Natasha Matila-Smith’s video work *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud* 2019 and Callum McGrath’s new ACCA commission, *What’s after this?* 2026. From anxiety to apathy, and pleasure to productivity, the internet has become embedded in society’s physical and psychic landscapes. It feeds a natural human tendency towards connection as well as escapism,¹³ however, it is propped up by stakeholders with vested interest in its sites and applications. Books such as *Stolen Focus* (2022) and *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (2019) reveal how social media platforms and websites are designed to encourage addiction through stimulating dopamine receptors. Inbuilt mechanisms intentionally negate conscientious engagement to instead dull focus and encourage compulsion towards instant gratification. While it is not necessary to abort the internet, awareness of these strategies offers pathways toward fulfillment over disillusion. Artists including Brown and Mattes reveal the absurdity of our digitally charged relationships that have real world implications for better and for worse. By holding up a mirror, Mattes for example, hopes to invite the reflexive question, ‘what are we actually reaching for with every swipe?’¹⁴

The issue of internet-induced apathy reached a turning point during the heights of the pandemic with the rise of social media politics and the live streaming of crises. Beginning with the 2020 recorded murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, awareness of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (est. 2013) irrecoverably surged, and ushered in a new frontier of unfiltered, live streamed, and grassroots politics and advocacy online. Following similar circuits of information dissemination, we have witnessed unfiltered and unfolding documentation of devastating events such as the War on Ukraine, the Black Summer Bushfires, the LA Bushfires, the Lismore Floods, the Genocide in Gaza, the role out of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the United States, the Bondi Attacks, and recently, the War on Iran. The positive uptake of BLM discourse set a precedent for the effectiveness of online advocacy on social change, yet cycles of desensitisation to apathy; misinformation to confusion (heightened by AI) seem to threaten and even reverse progress in bridging divides.

12 Laing, 2017, p. 19.

13 See Dr Natalie Philips referenced in ‘This Is Your Brain on Jane Austen: The Neuroscience of Reading Great Literature’, *Health, Literature, Neuroscience, Science*, 14 July, 2015. <https://www.openculture.com/category/health/page/19> [accessed 27 April 2026]. There exists an age-old human tendency towards escapism. More than just a symptom of the pace of contemporary life; ‘bed rotting’ for example, reveals a natural need for rest, relaxation, imagination, and passive pleasure. Henry David Thoreau in 1854 in his seminal piece *On Living a Good Life*, first proposed the term ‘brain rot’, to describe those ‘liking simpler ideas instead of complex ones’. Literary theorist Dr Natalie Phillips furthermore, cites the phenomenon of being drawn to and seeking out simplicity as emerging from ‘too much’ printed and easily accessible literature.

14 Kayla Mattes, Supplied statement, 22 May 2025.



Kayla Mattes, *Lonely Planet* 2025–2026 (detail) handwoven cotton, wool (hand-dyed), mohair, faux fur, silk, acrylic, polyester, beads, 130.0 x 655.0 cm (approx.). Supported in part by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Moe Wakai

15 For more context of the work of Melissa Nguyen see Myles Russell Cook, ‘Are you lonley tonight, I’m so lonesome I could cry’., *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026, pp. 46–49.

16 Madeline Miller, *Circe*, 2018, Bloomsbury Publishing, Sydney, p. 333.

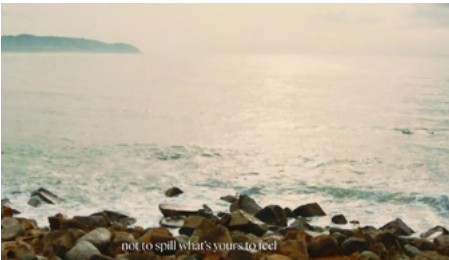
17 Sarah Haggart, ‘Communitas revisited: Victor Turner and the transformation of a concept’, *Anthropological Theory*, 25, vol. 3, 2025, pp. 313–337. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14634996241282143> [accessed 30 March 2026].

Lot 397, James Nguyen’s reflective response to the theme of loneliness reveals entrenched, relentless and surreptitious systems of injustice that continue to uphold inequality. By considering just one historically loaded object from his archive—the *Special Constables Wooden Baton* from *The Collection of Anglo-Australian Arts*—Nguyen signals to the vast web of inherited racism and classicism that society is caught in, and also details the exacting and honest work required to genuinely understand and grow. He shares some of his journey in establishing an archive and how his motivations have developed from retribution to rigor (or somewhere between both). This journey is a revelatory counterpoint to the pace at which the media and internet move; I am led to consider the depth and sincerity lost in the pursuit of the new. I sense a similar invitation to reconnect with materials intentionally and methodically in Mattes’ tapestry, hand-woven over more than a year, she rescues the viral memes of today from becoming the relics of tomorrow. Similarly, Patrick Pound’s site-specific commission *Museum of Loneliness* 2026 collects and presents a myriad of physical objects selected by the artist in response to the theme of loneliness, creating an atmosphere of contemplation, as if walking through a Zen garden.

What is not included is also implied in the spaces between objects and some of the artist’s processes for working with archives. Second generation Vietnamese Australian and Melbourne-based painter, Melissa Nguyen brings together memory and found archival photographs in her new commission *A letter to my mother; A letter to your mother* 2026. Without their own family photo albums due to the impacts of war-induced migration,¹⁵ Nguyen gives form to lost or nearly lost memories inherited from her parents via conversations and letters. By turning to seemingly familiar photographs and layering her own family and memories into her painted adaptations of the original photographs, the faint images appear as impressions that ask you to sit with them to see them as clearly as possible; as if a visual for the embodied process of intergenerational knowledge sharing. In their own ways, James Nguyen, Patrick Pound, Kayla Mattes and Melissa Nguyen each seem to incite active attention and embodied comprehension. As if a counterpoint to the pace and boarderlessness of the digital space, their attention to scale, detail and the physical speak to and uphold the quiet, cumulative, patient, and often solitary labour of maintaining a history and future with integrity.

He does not mean that we are not frightened. Only that: we are here. This is what it means to swim in the tide, to walk the earth and feel it touch your feet. This is what it means to be alive.

–Madeline Miller¹⁶



All images: Gideon Appah, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* 2025 (still) two-channel video with sound, 06:12 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Transgressing boundaries and overcoming distances—whether between cultures, geographies or individual bodies—is a fraught project, for difference is so beautiful but can also be so lonely. This tension is beautifully held by the motif of the ocean that is referenced in the work of Melissa Nguyen and Gideon Appah, and the writing of Katie Paine. So successfully does the ocean encapsulate the duality of separation and connection that it has long been considered a quintessentially liminal space; a space that is perceivably

betwixt and between, suspended within a process of being and becoming. Such conditions invite a loosening of the structures that normally govern how we present ourselves, opening a threshold for transformation. Liminality is often conditional to ‘communitas’.¹⁷ A Latin term describing an intense, unstructured community spirit, communitas’ modern sociological meaning was coined by anthropologist Victor Turner to encapsulate the temporary transcendence of social structure, and the fostering profound human connection and collective joy.¹⁸ Turner’s concept is an effective framework for unpacking the emotional registers of Gideon Appah’s filmic work *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* 2025 and painting *Boy with a bird* 2023 that celebrate the power of collective human experience and presence with nature. To then reflect again on the seaside solitude of Paine’s lamenting protagonist—here a foil to the peaceful and solitary figures depicted in Appah’s works—the contrast between Paine and Appah’s characters reveal how subjective emotional landscapes shape a view on a constant, such as the seas.

Transformation requires time and space for internal shifts to stir and settle. The conditions for liminality and communitas to emerge perhaps render it less ironic and more obvious that cities can feel lonelier than remote places. Modern work and life models, neoliberal ambitions, and technology seem to fragment pathways to presence. In contrast, Deep Time is a cosmic order that endures in distinctive ways between and across language groups of Australia’s First Peoples—the world’s longest continuing cultures. Deep Time resists Western translation, so is often described by what it is not, or as an expansive, relational, and non-linear understanding of existence across generations. There is no word for ‘nonlinear’ in many First Nations languages because time is not separated or abstracted in that way. Instead, it is a continuum connecting all beings, grounded in collective knowledge and care for Country. This cultural knowledge acknowledges impermanence, rejecting the illusion of human control. Rather than chasing progress, it values the ongoing work of maintaining ‘strong story’—knowledge built over time through relationships.¹⁹

Dr David Harworth’s commissioned essay explores the social and environmental ramifications of human disconnection from nature that has been intensified by colonial, gloabalised and capitalist systems. While recognising the sustainability of many different First Nations systems across the world and not looking to appropriate or over translate cultural systems and knowledge, Harworth introduces biologist Marc Bekoff’s concept ‘biocentric anthropomorphism’ as a helpful framework for readers to revisit or perhaps rekindle inter-species empathy.²⁰ Harworth surveys some globally resonant cases of ‘endlings’—animals who are the last of their species—and charts a human tendency to anthropomorphise the experiences of animals. This tendency is both the subject and the question of Kelly Yu’s *Endling* 2024. The speculative-fiction and comedy-forward short film follows the story of the last goldfish on earth and its carer. Although seemingly absurd, the premise points to real issues of ecological loss as well as the double standards in how many humans relate to the natural world. Although Harworth and Yu’s pieces both address the fact that the history of earth reveals extinction as the rule and survivance as the exception, they probe at our shortcomings in helping ourselves in the face of known climate and biological truths.

18 Ibid. Note: Communitas bares a deep sense of equality, solidarity, and shared experience among a group, often appearing spontaneously.

19 See Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, 2019, Text Publishing, Melbourne. <https://cat2.lib.unimelb.edu.au:443/record=b7338253-S30> [accessed 30 March 2026].

20 Dr David Haworth, ‘Endlings and Other Lonely Creatures’, *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.*, 2026, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026. pp. 101-107.

21 Glenn Albrecht, Et. al, ‘Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change’, *Australasian psychiatry: bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists*, 2007, p. 1.

22 Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 1923, p. 19. <https://www.kahlilgibran.com/images/The%20Prophet%20Ebook%20by%20Kahlil%20Gibran.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2026].

23 Harworth, ‘Endlings and Other Lonely Creatures’, 2026, p. 107.

24 Dr Kirsten Stevens quoted in interview with curator, Sophie Prince, 16 March 2026.

25 See Dewi Jaimangal-Jones, Amette Pritchard & Nigel Morgan, ‘Going the distance: locating journey, liminality and rites of passage in dance music experiences’, *Leisure Studies*, 29:3, pp. 253-268.

The concept of solastalgia captures the anguish many feel from existential and climate-related issues. Coined by Glenn Albrecht, it is defined as ‘homesickness without leaving home’,²¹ specifically triggered by climate change, mining, or natural disasters. The body, the mind and the environment are inextricably linked, and I can see the contortive dance between these powerful forces play out across Borland’s sculptural works. Through abstract yet bodily forms—including some sculptures such as *Slit* 2025 and *Froggy* 2025 that are sliced through or punctured, implicating their context within them—they seem to suggest the physical weight of loneliness, grief, and helplessness within a fractured, overwhelming system.

Let there be spaces in your togetherness. And let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.

–Pablo NerudaKhalil Gibran²²

Dr Harworth recalls the 1977 launch of the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft and their identical Voyager Golden Record as a poetic insight into what is considered key to representing our life here on earth, ‘designed to be listened to by any intelligent extraterrestrial life that came across the spacecraft’.²³ Claire G. Coleman’s commissioned science fiction story also takes us to space, expanding our consideration of where our sympathy, core values and sense of meaning might extend to—perhaps it’s the farthest unknown corners of the galaxy or more close to home when opening ChatGPT. Coleman’s text follows the perspective of a data unit that is programmed to guide a spaceship endlessly into the void of space—its consciousness achingly aware of its unbridled alone-ness that compels it to consider desperate choices. Personally, Harworth and Coleman’s representations of the cosmic propulsion towards connection orbit me right back to earth. It is here where I wish to observe and feel the capacity to access deep care and connection.

I recently experienced communitas and liminality in full when I pulled myself away from work, admin and the news for three days for a revitalising weekend at Golden Plains festival in regional Victoria this March 2026. Over the weekend I was reminded that rest, relaxation and grounding are less of a contradiction and more of a compliment to overall productivity. After the festival, with the themes of *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry.* in mind, I was compelled to reach out to Dr Kirsten Stevens, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Arts and Cultural Management Program at the University of Melbourne. Dr Stevens taught one of my favourite subjects at university, Cultural Festivals and Special Events, and my email to meet was met with generously accepting the invitation and the added synergy of noting she had also been at the Golden Plains!

Over Standing Room coffees, we reflected on the weekend. ‘It was like a mass breath out’,²⁴ she described. ‘I even loved the rain on the Saturday night’, I added, ‘it felt grounding and like a sign that we needn’t care for how we look as long as we feel comfortable’. As if our own case study, we unpacked how festival organisers, venues and musicians can be considered custodians of spaces intended



for the gathering of ‘chosen family’, and when empowered by their responsibility, liminal spaces can be produced by the suspension of usual rules, norms and ordered time. These revised productive parameters allow for other important values to be reprioritised—environmental, mental health, emotional regulation, radical generosity, being present, and identity formation, to name a few.²⁵

Orchestrated liminal spaces such as festivals and club nights can go on to inspire embodied, intentional and meaningful actions in life beyond the time and place of a festival. These insights can guide interpreting the works of Melbourne-based artists Nick Mullaly and Callum McGrath. Mullaly’s vivid yet dreamy large-scale paintings, depict three iconic Melbourne clubs—Sircuit, The Peel and Miscellania—celebrating the enrichment and connection these spaces provided when he was in the depths of a particularly lonely period. As a gay man, Mullaly highlights the value of spaces for ‘chosen family’ to commune and feel safe, sharing; ‘I felt so much chance emerge from just the choice to go out, and the hindsight of the friends and memories I’ve made has attuned me to the beauty of the butterfly effect’.²⁶

The dancefloor has long functioned as a site of refuge, self-expression and self-care for those relatively marginalised from mainstream care and consideration. The turning point for rave culture, for example, emerged in the 1980s amongst Black, queer, and trans communities in Detroit. Communities and music pioneers created underground parties as sanctuaries; spaces for self-expression, healing, and where music turned exclusion into belonging.²⁷ It was both intentional and effective reclamation as seen in the work of Underground Resistance—founded by Mike Banks and Jeff Mills—who ‘used techno as a tool for defiance against racism and capitalism’.²⁸ During the AIDS epidemic the dancefloor became a crucial space for healing, community and awareness building, as captured in the words of trans icon and activist Marsha P. Johnson; ‘If we didn’t do the danceathon, darling, people would be saying, “Oh those people don’t care.” Things like that are very important’.²⁹ Beau Newham’s commissioned text *Plagues* charts the emergence and legacy of AIDS within our social fabric, noting that much of the heavy lifting in debunking moral panic and fostering actual care has been forged by artists. Newham sites the work of Keith Haring and Nan Goldin, among others, for their roles in reclaiming corrupted AIDS awareness narratives through their art. Indeed, Goldin and Haring also both made their work visible to those directly affected by the issues they explored or depicted, showing their art in clubs and public spaces. I have long considered recalling this insight as important to feeling the full meaning of their art whenever I encounter it in a gallery.

The current and historical significance of the dancefloor is represented in McGrath’s *What’s after this?* 2026, a two-channel video and installation that marks the third and final iteration of a series exploring dance and counter-culture scenes, following *Deviations* 2021, and *Together, Alone* 2023. The channel showing an animation journeys through a club setting inspired by Melbourne venue Alter Space, and introduces the viewer to iconic artworks from history that were celebrated for their nuanced depictions of club culture, including Mark Leckey’s *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* 1999, and Jeremy Shaw’s *Phase Shifting Index* 2020, affirming both the legacy of dance culture and artwork that celebrates

26 Nicholas Mullaly quoted in interview with curator, Sophie Prince, 1 April 2026.

27 Craig Jennex, ‘How LGBTQ2+ 1980s dance parties sparked collective joy and power – and can again’, *The Conversation*, 11 March 2022. <https://theconversation.com/how-lgbtq2-1980s-dance-parties-sparked-collective-joy-and-power-and-can-again-174664> [accessed 28 April 2026]; and https://www.instagram.com/p/DXffFvLjptu/?img_index=1 [accessed 24 April 2026].

28 Ibid.

29 Marsha P. Johnson quoted in Tourmaline, *MARSHA: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2025, p. 190. See also the exhibition *Tourmaline: Transcendent at ACCA* (December 2025 – March 2026) for more about the life and legacy of Marsha P. Johnson.

All images: Callum McGrath, *What’s after this?* 2026 (still) two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum) Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026.



30 Sophie Cai, ‘Burn Out Culture’, *Art Guide*, 19 June 2020. <https://artguide.com.au/burnt-out-culture/> [accessed 30 March 2026].

it. The other channel splices together the artist’s personal collection of footage from nights out, not only conveying the genuine atmosphere of these scenes, but also canonising a specific contemporary zeitgeist, with cameos from local and international creatives including Eartheater, Chuleo Club, Who Cares?, and House Mum (AKA Jac Meddings who also the score for the artwork).

At the heart of a dance floor is what Durkheim termed collective effervescence; the heightened emotional state that arises when individuals come together in shared activity. This phenomenon is characterised by a sense of unity, energy, and transcendence that exceeds individual experience. In such moments, participants may feel part of something larger than themselves—a collective body moving, breathing, and feeling in synchrony. Like liminality and communitas, collective effervescence is not trivial; it is inextricably linked to creative expression, reclamation, and acts of social justice, as well as practices of rest and relaxation.

In 2020, at the height of COVID-19 lockdowns in Melbourne and a slowed down world, Sophie Cai wrote; ‘With rest, we can recover. With rest, we can re-evaluate. We can come together, advocate for policies and systems that offer greater support not just for artists and arts workers, but for all workers’.³⁰ Although powerful ideas, movements and culture are so often born out of adversity, we should not need the world to become sick to enact care and creativity. And so, whether you are lonely or not, I propose extending Cai’s notion of choosing to rest, to choosing to be alone together.

All images: Gideon Appah, *Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision* 2025 (still) two-channel video with sound, 06:12 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.



THE NIGHT WATCH



KATIE PAINE

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

*Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.*

...

*There passed a weary time. Each throat
Was parched, and glazed each eye.*

...

*Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.*

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1798*

The house has developed the stale, cloistered smell
of unwashed bedsheets, dishes in the sink, salty
tears staining pillows, blinds drawn.

An hour later, I pulled myself out of the house,
body dragging. Neat suburban lawns give way to sandy
gravel, rows of fragrant pine trees, and finally, the
bluestone seawall.

I gasp in the cold, my body a desiccated kernel unfurling
in the damp, sulfuric air. Waiting for the tide to drain
away. The mountainous horizon is finally swept clean.
The bay stretches as far as the eye can see. A small
flock of ducks waddle by, mothers gently shepherding
their young forwards into the marshes.

I did not know my baby had died for almost two weeks.

To carry a pregnancy is akin to encountering a ghost.
Flickers and twitches invisible to those around you,
like an apparition only you can see. The baby changed me
and the way I encountered the world. Everything became
foggy, I felt unsteady, needing sleep like a drug.

Two weeks after our loss, we moved here, to a town that
straddles wetlands along a crescent bay. Flocks of
birds fill the slate grey sky. An enormous migration
to some unknown destination. Take me with you, I think,
as they ascend to the heavens.

I stand upon the boggy shoreline, haunted by a being
that was never quite of this world. I have learned it
is possible to fall wildly in love with someone not yet
here, only to lose them months later. Sometimes the
loneliness feels akin to madness. The tears are quick
to surface; something darker simmers, waiting to erupt.

The thought of my baby, now a mess of dissected tissue
lying somewhere in a neatly labelled medical waste
disposal bag is crushing. Instead, I like to think
of them residing here, among the birds, always just
outside my field of vision.

In my mind, I have renamed this township the *Doldrums*; a term glumly ascribed by sailors to the area where the Northeast and the Southeast trade winds converge. Known as such because of its monotonous, windless weather, the *Doldrums* encircles the earth in a serpentine embrace. I imagine gargantuan elaborately carved Baroque ships brought to a halt as the wind dies, their once billowing sails turn flaccid. A descent into hysteria induced by starvation, solitude and stasis.

Parched, carpeted waiting rooms create a new form of stagnation. Now we do not need to be at the mercy of the winds to reach a wrenching motionlessness. Each day constitutes endless waiting.

The birds wheeled above me during those weeks my child was growing, and continued, oblivious, on their mysterious trajectories after I had lost them. I feel so far from the world here, in this self-imposed isolation. I walk along the inlet as the wind howls, its rush hiding my racking sobs. Flickers of rage that no one else quite shares my sorrow, that the world meanders onwards.

During the summer, in the thick of early pregnancy, time suspended itself. A dizzying, groggy mess, I counted each day with increasing anxiety, like a sailor frantically scanning the horizon for sight of land. Retching in the bathroom, a longing for the comfort of solid ground beneath my feet.

A crisp blue shirt, matching latex gloves. A little monitor gazes sternly downwards at the examination bed, bestowing wrenching and magical images in turn. The doctor used a slippery probe to hunt something out amongst the undulating tunnels of flesh, liquid, marrow and veins. We watched a form materialise inside the inky black cavity. The doctor said the yolk sac is enlarged and they can't see a heartbeat. There is a moment of catastrophic silence. All I can think is that their tiny black and white limbs are the most miraculous things I've ever seen. The nauseating drive home from the hospital, choked with tears and shock, like I might implode at any moment.

Back on the shoreline, vast assemblies of swans, herons and gulls convene about unknown agendas.

I remember reading the Celtic folktale *The Children of Lir* as a child. A spiteful stepmother transforms a king's four children into swans and curses them to wander cold seas and lakes for 900 years. Here, a swan dips its elegant black neck into rippling water and I recall the book's illustration of a swan battered against craggy rocks in a stormy ocean. When the spell finally breaks, the children turn back into humans—only to find their father long dead. The snare of time is the cruelest of all.

Sometimes loneliness swallows me. Time becomes slippery; days and nights blur together as if I was sleepwalking. These walks become an anchor. The sea becomes a gentle clock which guides me along its circumference.

I think enviously of objects, wreckage and bones, peacefully sinking through waters dappled in sunlight before reaching the deepest places that light cannot reach. Instead, I am stuck here, tethered to the surface.

Giant container ships crawl past along the horizon utterly unfazed.

Long before lighthouses, people lit beacon fires along the coast—tiny, flickering signals attempting to bridge impossible distances. Even in the sixteenth century, small stone beacon huts were an early form of optical telegraph. Yet so often these signals fail to reach their intended shores: *a message that never arrives*.

My body never knew my baby had died, carrying them for days, perhaps weeks, with no warning sign. *No amount of monitoring can predict loss*, they tell me. A shimmering future that briefly appeared, and then just as rapidly receded from view.

The night has a soundscape of its own—foghorns, howling wind, the gentle lapping of waves. I lie awake remembering the cadence of hospital monitors and ultrasound static. The house is quiet at this time of night; nothing stirs on the street outside. I glance at the clock. They say that on night watch, the hour between 4-5am is the loneliest time at sea. I lie here heavy with sadness as auburn streetlight trickles through the window. I remind myself that I am not alone in the darkness, somewhere out on moonlit waters I hold company with ships' navigators, fishermen and marine engineers. We each send out our own silent signals of existence.

Opposite: Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

***THAT SHIP IS SURE
TO WAIT:
CASSANDRA AND THE
LONELY WOMAN***



BRIDGET THOMPSON

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

*Down in the street they're all singing and shouting
 Staying alive though the city is dead
 Hiding their shame behind hollow laughter
 While you are crying alone in your bed
 Pity, Cassandra, that no one believed you
 But, then again, you were lost from the start
 Now we must suffer and sell our secrets
 Bargain, playing smart, aching in our hearts*

—ABBA, Cassandra¹

I did not expect to begin this essay quoting a largely forgotten ABBA lyric, but here we are.

Perhaps it is only apt since the namesake of ACCA's inaugural Art and Emotion exhibition, *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry*, is itself a title taken from an Elvis Presley song. I am sure there plenty of other ABBA songs that respond to the theme of loneliness, but it is the subject of this one that resonates so well with the exhibition. The song in question, *Cassandra*—first released as a B-side to the band's 1982 single *The Day Before You Came*—is set from the perspective of a citizen of Troy watching the priestess Cassandra leaving the city following its famous and devastating siege. In mythology, Cassandra—daughter to Troy's King Priam and Queen Hecuba—was a princess and a priestess who, along with her brother Helanus, held the gift of prophecy. In the most common accounts of their story, Helanus was taught the gift by his sister after it was bestowed upon her by the god Apollo. Of course, the gift came with a price: Cassandra had to promise to sleep with Apollo in return. This is a promise Cassandra does not keep and, unable to remove the gift of prophecy, Apollo instead curses her to never be believed. In Cassandra's words;

*He came like a wrestler / magnificent,
 took me down and breathed his fire
 through me...at the climax I recoiled
 / I deceived Apollo...Even then I told
 my people all the grief to come...once I
 betrayed him I could never be believed.²*

While Helanus goes on to be considered a great prophet, Cassandra's divinations are never again taken seriously. The curse is hers alone, a punishment for withholding sex and, it is implied, a just one at that.

How lonely must Cassandra have felt when she prophesied the beginning of the Trojan war and was not believed. How lonely to foresee the wooden horse at the gates, crying omen while locked away when it is welcomed in. To look upon the faces of the living and know their certain death, city burnt to the ground, screaming only weightless warnings. It all came to pass. Cassandra, time and again, was left isolated and shamed; always true but never believed.

As if a prerequisite for inclusion, there are many lonely women in Greek mythology. Calypso alone on the island of Ogygia; Penelope waiting for Odysseus' return; Eurydice being dragged back to the underworld. But none of them have an ABBA song written about them.

Cassandra has inspired so many references, and I wonder what is the reason for Cassandra's ongoing legacy? Perhaps it is an affinity to the loneliness of not being believed, or the particular frustration of knowing you are right that keeps her haunting the zeitgeist. When thinking about attempts to convey the urgency of many current issues—the climate crisis, war on Iran, and sex trafficking, to name a few—Cassandra's story could not resonate more deeply.

It is her specific type of loneliness that pervades many streams of pop culture. Horror and thriller film characters such as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), Cassie Thomas in *Promising Young Woman* (2020) and Sidney Prescott in *Scream II* (1997) all echo the trope of the 'unheeded warning that comes to pass'. Cassandra's echo also can be heard in the music of Taylor Swift, Florence and the Machine and Emmy the Great. It is also no coincidence that these prominent examples of Cassandra-ism centre a female perspective.

Every day, Cassandra's story lives on in the woman at the doctor's office, her pain dismissed as cramps; of the sexual assault victim testifying against the 'nice guy'; or the lonely 'hysterical' woman, too emotional, too easy to dismiss. It is prevalent enough for pathologisation; 'Cassandra Syndrome' is defined by 'emotional distress and psychological exhaustion that arises from being chronically invalidated, especially by those you trust the most'.³ Jungian analyst Laurie Layton Schapira wrote in 1988 that female suffering—whether in the form of emotional 'hysteria' or 'somatic, often gynecological, complaints' and being dismissed when attempting to communicate these sufferings,⁴ were necessitating factors in Cassandra Syndrome. Unsurprisingly, the condition was notably made worse with an 'Apollo archetype' partner—analytical, rational and 'truth'-bound.

*You know the future is casting a shadow
 No one else sees it, but you know your fate
 Packing your bags, being slow and thorough
 Knowing, though you're late, that ship
 is sure to wait*

—ABBA, Cassandra⁵

The familiarity of the story of a woman too emotional, too hysterical to be believed harks back to early plays about Cassandra. Following the siege of Troy, King Agamemnon took her as his concubine and sailed with her back to Greece. There, she has a prophecy of Agamemnon's bloody fate—murdered by his wife Clytemnestra while he bathes:

*a thrash of robes, she traps him / writhing / black horn glints, twists / she gores him through! / And now he buckles, look, the bath swirls red / There's stealth and murder in the cauldron, do you hear?*⁶

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, as Cassandra approaches the palace where she knows she will die, her knowledge of the tragic and unchangeable reality of things to come is a calming thought:

*I address you as the Gates of Death / I pray it comes with one clear stroke / no convulsions, the pulses ebbing out / in gentle death. I'll close my eyes and sleep.*⁷

Despite her clarity, a chorus of unbelieving urge her not to go.

*No escape, my friends, not now.*⁸

After a life of being overlooked and doubted, Cassandra knows the only person who will believe what she says, is herself. She willingly enters the palace to die.

What strikes me about Cassandra's death is that she persists in speaking her truths until the end. She knows she is cursed and that it is irreversible, just as she knows this journey will lead her to death. Throughout, still she prophesises, still she speaks.

Her story leads me to think that in the face of loneliness, perhaps this is all we can do. We must try to cure the disease with that very thing it definitively lacks—connection. Sitting in the muddy waters of solitude can quickly turn into sinking into quicksand. With no one to pull you out, it is all too easy to be engulfed.

The reason ABBA's *Cassandra* is the framing for this essay is not just because I wanted to talk about them—which I always do—but because of its speaker. This nameless citizen of Troy does something not often seen in tellings of Cassandra's story—they see her loneliness for what it is. Not of a hysteric, but of a true woman not believed. They see her loss, the loss that she knew was coming, just as they see her trying in vain to delay her certain death. Knowing they cannot change fate any more than Cassandra can, still they acknowledge her. And they apologise:

*Sorry Cassandra, I didn't believe
You really had the power
I only saw it as dreams you would weave
Until the final hour*

*I'm sorry Cassandra
I'm sorry Cassandra
I'm sorry Cassandra*⁹

In researching the song, I came across many pieces of wisdom in the place where all the great minds dwell—the YouTube comment section. I think jezebeljones659 said it best:

*As far as I know poor Cassandra didn't get an apology from anyone—till the ABBA team wrote one for her.*¹⁰

By talking about Cassandra, we pull her out of the quicksand of loneliness she felt fated to succumb to. By talking about her we acknowledge, finally, that we believe her.

01 ABBA, 'Cassandra', B-side of *The Day Before You Came*, Polar Music, 1982.

02 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, New York, 1977, lines 1211–1218.

03 Cheryl Kennedy MacDonald, 'What Is Cassandra Syndrome? When You Feel Unseen in Your Relationship', *Female Focused Therapy*, January 28, 2026

04 Laurie Layton Schapira, *The Cassandra Complex: Living with Disbelief: A Modern Perspective on Hysteria*, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1988, p. 10. <https://www.femalefocusedtherapy.com/uncategorized/what-is-cassandra-syndrome-when-you-feel-unseen-in-your-relationship/> [accessed 1 April 2026].

05 ABBA, 'Cassandra', 1982.

06 Aeschylus, 1977, lines 1128–1131.

07 Ibid., lines 1314–1317.

08 Ibid., line 1322

09 ABBA, 'Cassandra', 1982.

10 jezebeljones659 quoted in comment on *Cassandra*, YouTube video, YouTube, posted 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuY-suICRjg&list=RDKuY-suICRjg&start_radio=1 [accessed 1 April 2026].

John Hamilton Mortimer, *Cassandra*, from 'Twelve Characters from Shakespeare' portfolio March 15, 1776
Gift of Mrs. Olga Sichel and Max Philippson, 1962. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. No. 62.557.203



Opposite: Nick Mullaly, *Toss 2026* (detail) oil on canvas, 36.0 x 46.5 cm. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

PLAGUES



BEAU NEWHAM

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

There is a loneliness inherent to a plague. This is despite the fact that, by its very nature, plagues infect vast numbers of people. A plague transforms people en masse, transporting them from our notions of ‘Us’ and ‘We’ and relegating them to the margins, the abject. To become one of the ‘infected’ is to experience rejection and isolation.

I use the word plague here for all its emotive, mythical weight. Plague operates beyond the medical realities of any singular virus or disease. A place where punishment and judgement are quickly mobilised to justify the rejection and marginalisation of both the infected, and those deemed likely to be infected. In a plague the loneliness of infection becomes both justified and necessary. A feature of the societal response, not an unintended bug.

AIDS was, and often still is, a plague. From the worst moments of the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s an image was born of the plague-ridden body that continues to haunt our cultures. Invoking in our mind images of an emaciated man, presumably gay, lying alone in an empty hospital ward, or a double gloved hand touching lesion covered skin. This was the fertile ground of documentaries, scare campaigns and the shallow end of journalism. These ‘plague images’ can sometimes reflect the reality of AIDS but ultimately reduce all meaning down to their lonely death. Images so pervasive that for many it came to consume entirely what it meant to have HIV, haunting every sexual encounter.

The characterisation of AIDS as a plague is longstanding. In 1983 The Australian newspaper broadcast the emergence of a ‘Gay Plague’. Later it became manifest during the short lived but long felt Grim Reaper campaign of 1987. The framing of AIDS as a plague was so pervasive that by 1989, Susan Sontag, in her now seminal essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, dissected it as a key example of how metaphor both creates and mirrors the social meaning of how HIV and AIDS operates in our culture.

A plague brings with it the impulse to isolate, so it is no wonder that loneliness has become tied to our thinking of AIDS, sex, and queerness. Any activity perceived to invite the spread of AIDS became suspect, marking individuals as deserving of removal, to be excised from the social fabric, as though loneliness and death were themselves a form of punishment. In combating this collapse of meaning, many of the most powerful interventions—and in many contexts the only interventions—have been through art.

In New York, photographers Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, and Peter Hujar bore witness to the height of the AIDS crisis, confronting and reclaiming the portrayal of people with AIDS in their own unique ways. Similarly, in Australia, William Yang’s *Sadness* 1992 offered a tender monologue that guides us through the last days of his friend Allan. In this same context, the global AIDS Quilt project emerges as a communal artistic intervention to the marginalisation and isolation of the people who died. Rather than allowing these individuals to be atomised and rendered invisible, the quilt panels act as tangible memorials, crafted by the loved ones of the lost and their wider communities. When brought together, they urge us to confront the profound grief that AIDS has brought to all of us.

Forty years on and the plague should be over. With both effective HIV treatment and new prevention tools like PrEP and PEP the fear of transmission should be behind us. The stigma, however, of ‘having AIDS’, continues to be loud, brutal and lonely in our cultural imagination. In contemporary popular culture HIV is relegated to the past tense. Popular TV shows like *Pose* (2018–2021) and *It’s a Sin* (2021) transport us back to the 1980s and 1990s, the eras when having HIV *meant something*, or so we are increasingly told. Today, we are disconnected from the image of AIDS as plague, HIV itself seems to be adrift without depiction.

The shifting medical reality of HIV has brought with it the appropriate language shift from ‘AIDS’ to ‘HIV’, as well as new metaphors for how the illness operates today. The most impactful of these new metaphors has undoubtedly been ‘undetectability’. The term was introduced into this context in response to the growing evidence base that effective treatment for HIV stops its ongoing transmission. It brings with it an almost childlike notion that what you can’t see, can’t hurt you, or out of sight, out of mind. It also feels apt for describing the ways in which the manageable (even mundane) realities of living with HIV today sit uneasily within a narrative that began shrouded in unprecedented moral panic.

Sontag predicted this, labelling the process as the ‘dedramatisation’ of an illness once it becomes more understood and treatable. This ‘dedramatisation’, alongside the romanticisation of the drama inherent in the imagined AIDS of the past, hides hard or complex truths in plain sight. We live in a world where effective treatment means that all people with HIV can live long, healthy lives, and a world where over 600,000 people are estimated to die from AIDS each year. Both these things are true.

As I approach my fortieth birthday, and as the HIV in my blood continues to be marked undetectable, it is with no little irony that I have started to see AIDS everywhere. Like so many who grew up in the late 80s and 90s, Disney holds a firm grasp on the memories of my childhood. The songs that still sit in my head all these years later—the songs of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1992)—were written by Howard Ashman. I was shocked to discover that a man who created the prevailing archetype of children’s entertainment was also a man who first lost his sight and then his life to AIDS. It was a shock born from the ways that I had learned to border AIDS away into the realms of the adult, the sexual, the queer.

As a young man, Keith Haring was one of the few people I knew of who had died from AIDS. However, it was not until after my own diagnosis that I truly grappled with the weight of his death. Throughout much of his life, Haring remained a marginal figure, still on the periphery of art world fame during his first Australian show at ACCA in 1984. Since then, though, he has become one of the most visually recognisable artists in modern popular culture. When I came to learn that it was only twenty-two days after Haring passed that his friend, collaborator and fellow artist Tseng Kwong Chi also died, his work grew to become a personal touchstone to understanding the brutal and concentrated impact that AIDS has had on queer communities. Sometimes I imagine Haring’s ‘radiant baby’ symbol, with all its mass-produced ubiquity, representing someone who died from AIDS. It serves as a self-generated reminder of those we have all lost, and continue to lose to AIDS.

As someone embedded in community and engaged with queer archives, I am also aware that even my own cultural touchpoints to the history of AIDS are shaped by the noise of global cultural production. For every cultural giant that has propelled our collective memories, there are millions of histories, works, and stories from the communities I live in, work in, fuck in, that are largely forgotten. David McDiarmid’s rainbow aphorism *Don’t forget to remember* 1994 was a response to this tendency. While his name was not known to me at the time, McDiarmid was an artist whose visual language was part of the sexual landscape and lexicon of the Sydney where I came of age.

Talking about HIV and AIDS in the early 2000s felt similar to the experience of talking about COVID-19 now; both conversations are often met with a vague exhaustion and a wilfulness to forget about the hard times. When I think about the loneliness that is held in our memories of AIDS, I no longer immediately think of the hospital room, but of the innumerable ways in which we are still living in the aftermath of its outbreak. I think of Nick Mullaly’s *Still life with PrEP, strawberries and Jungle Juice* 2024. I think of something mundane, everyday, and manageable.

When writing about how to shake off destructive and harmful metaphors I hear Sontag’s refrain, ‘metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticised, belaboured, used up’.¹ It is this important work—the work of debunking and reframing—that art has and continues to do. I still remember the physical reaction I had to my first time seeing Emil Cañita’s work *Pox Cocksucking Tranny Exposed* 2025. The way in which the work forcefully challenges the image of the past—our AIDS plague history—to meet the realities of the present. It is in our everyday lives that the ghosts of transmission, contagion and rejection continue to haunt us, even as we hold the tools to excise them.

As the image of the lonely and isolated AIDS death gradually loses its power and volume, art offers a way to rethread HIV back into our vision of the communities we have lost. Art holds a mirror to the world we have lost, and the one we are building as the future. Olivia Laing writes beautifully about this idea; ‘There are so many things that art can’t do. It can’t bring the dead back to life, it can’t mend arguments between friends, or cure AIDS, or halt the pace of climate change... It does have a capacity to create intimacy’.²

With Laing’s words in mind, I return to the work of Cañita and I am reminded that although many judgements continue to haunt us, the time has come to bury them. It has been more than forty years since the emergence of AIDS, we know now that a death brought by plague does not have to be a lonely death, or even an individual one. Death can be lonely, but it can also be communal, with the loss, grief and hurt felt as a collective. To ‘use up’ the ghosts of the AIDS of the past, we must continue to acknowledge the ways they haunt the present, even if only to show that they hold no power over our future.

01 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 1978, Penguin Classics, London, 2002, p. 94.

02 Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Canongate Books, London, 2017, p. 212.

Nick Mullaly, *Still life with PrEP, strawberries and Jungle Juice* 2024, oil on canvas, 41.0 x 53.0 cm. Courtesy the artist



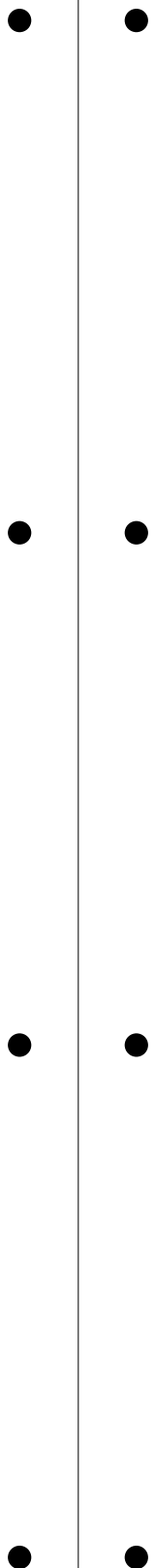
Emil Cañita, *Pox Cocksucking Tranny Exposed* 2025, HIV+ blood, bonded cotton, quilting, thread, water based ink, rope, 83.0 x 175.0 cm. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. Made in collaboration with Luke George, Tim Krulic, Dazza, Tilly Lawless, Jack Shaw, Hugh Crothers, Marc Lyons, and NMBQ services Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art Made in collaboration with Luke George, Tim Krulic, Dazza, Tilly Lawless, Jack Shaw, Hugh Crothers, Marc Lyons, and NMBQ services.



Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness 2026* (detail). mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

Opposite: Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026 (still)
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss, 24:00 mins, soundscape by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

HONE



JUDY ANNEAR

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

the gravel is laid out in front
 of the house
 inside is an idea of home
 where books rise out
 of their shelves
 wanting to be read
 offering their words and images
 their wish to be handled
 as the sky passes by
 outside and over the gravel

Dielman and Dalloway come together
 in a room with Montaigne
 Rilke and Boym
 to talk about a home
 not a house—
 prepare to receive yourself
 there in the home that never changes
 with the inexpressible fear of freedom
 in knowing that love is always solitary—
 until death enters
 to take thought away
 and alienation ends

 the wish for a home
 is never more than a dream—
 you can never go back
 you do dream of the ruins
 of what once was with those
 who once were—
 the past is a place of luxury
 like the books with their words
 and images that rise up
 into the present becoming
 so ghostly you can
 reinvent each moment

just as you prepare to be someone
 who is not nostalgic nor a killer
 nor aphoristic nor silent
 just as I am inventing you
 for me just now

JEANNE DIELMAN was played by Delphine Seyrig in Chantal Akerman's eponymous film, made in 1975. It is considered one of best movies of all time, and certainly the most haunting in its depiction of female labour in the home.

MRS DALLOWAY was written in 1925 by Virginia Woolf. Traversing a day, an intersection is created between the interior lives of two highly sensitive individuals, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, who nonetheless never meet.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE first published his essays in 1580. Chapter 38 in Book 1 is titled *On Solitude*. His essays are noted for their ongoing influence on and relevance to modern life.

RAINER MARIA RILKE wrote his only substantial prose work in 1910, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. It is semi-autobiographical and considers the anxiety and alienation induced by modernity.

SVETLANA BOYM'S *The future of nostalgia* (2001) is one her most influential books, dissecting reflective and restorative nostalgias. She was also a lucid analyst of homesickness and sickness of home.



Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

Opposite: Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera, site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
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LOT 397



JAMES NGUYEN

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

Now largely forgotten, the Brisbane General Strike was a foundational moment in australia’s colonial history. Hidden in the deceased estate of Captain W.C. Thompson, the *Special Constables Wooden Baton* is an uncomfortable—perhaps monstrous—relic. It reminds us that the basic privileges of workers’ rights and the right to protest were never inherent. Rather, the readiness of business-owners and volunteers to fight alongside police and authority—to essentially beat down unarmed people with horses and batons—is explicitly revealing of the national character.

Forty-four centimetres of hard black lignum vitae. Made from the so-called ‘wood of life’, this baton has been shaped into a smooth, compact form that feels cold to life. Dense, oily, and almost indestructible, the *Special Constables Wooden Baton* carries a balanced but dull weight. Crafted for blunt instruction, the baton was reportedly used against protesters during the 1912 Brisbane General Strike.

On the 30th of January 1912, forty-three tram workers were dismissed after wearing their union badges to work. Two days into their protest, 23,000 other union workers joined them, alongside an estimated 50,000 supporters who gathered to watch them march from the Brisbane Trades Hall to Fortitude Valley. Thus, begun a seven-week general strike that spread across the entire city, rapidly escalating into violent confrontations between demonstrators and police.

Bolstered by 3,000 ‘Special Constables’ recruited from business owners and mounted volunteers from the country, Brisbane police were emboldened by Commissioner William Cahill, who openly ordered baton charges by these new mounted constables. Their actions mostly injured children, women, and the elderly—people least able to get out of the way of horses. Mounted baton strikes soon became routine practice, aimed at preventing people from public gatherings. Something that became unlawful when the Police Commissioner decided the public was a threat to the state.

The *Nguyen Collection of Anglo-australian Arts* was conceived as a conceptual and artistic inversion of colonial collecting practices. Whereas traditional western museums accumulated the cultural spoils of their colonised subjects, this collection proposes an antagonistic gesture: of an Asian interloper collecting the overlooked artefacts of the coloniser. The baton represents a small but not insignificant part of this collection, accessioned under ‘federation’ objects’. Unlike displaced artefacts dubiously removed from the artist’s own birthplace and scattered across the globe like the Vietnamese diaspora—these Anglo-australian objects have not travelled far.

In this sense, the baton is not a lonely object, not removed from its home or siblings but still exists in an unbroken and continuous cultural environment of state-sanctioned violence. What it has become, is more like Nazi paraphernalia that people had held onto or even fetishised—although it is unlikely to appear on display publicly.

Recent legislative expansions of police ‘move-on’ powers and restrictions on public assembly in NSW and across australia have echoed the spiritual and material energy of the Special Constables Baton. Videos of aggressive policing against pro-Palestinian demonstrators in front of the Sydney Town Hall, contrasts with the permissive and restrained policing of far-right neo-Nazis outside the NSW parliament. What, then, is the role of the artist-collector in holding onto these colonial mementos?

Opposite: Lot 397, Special Constables Wooden Baton. Used in the 1912 Brisbane General Strike. Black Lignum Vitae wood, 44.0 cm (length). From the estate of Captain W.C Thompson, 1986 (ex-Pickles Auctions Lot. 380). Purchased at Davidson Auctions, Sydney, July 11, 2021. Courtesy the Nguyen Collection of Anglo-australian Arts. Photo: James Nguyen

The baton, neither forcibly removed from its homeland or stripped of its cultural context, has become an ostracised, if not forgotten ancestor—left to the auction house and deceased estates to administer, to be conveniently deferred to some unfamiliar power of attorney.

The problem with the tools and objects of enduring colonialism is that they remain too close to home. Too close at hand, when wielded with blunt force on protesters in Brisbane, and legislatively too close to a government that made ‘excessive force’ permissible outside the Sydney Town Hall.

Although the *Nguyen Collection of Anglo-australian Arts* began as a joking gesture of retribution, the spiritual and psychological weight of these Anglo-australian objects has pressed on my conscience. Serving as a playful intervention to enact cultural vindictiveness, these objects—like those from my own ancestral inheritance—undeniably carry rich cultural histories and knowledges. Inside a culture that is essentially openly racist and quietly authoritarian, choosing to live with these reminders, has allowed me to form a tacit relationship if not a weird gratitude towards these ostracised objects.

Despite being still steeped in the culture that made them, these objects are lonely in a different way. They have become neglected and disremembered by their own kin, something potentially more painful than being mistreated or fetishised by strangers.

Like my own ancestral materials—who possess a spirit and cultural life beyond the object world—these relics of Anglo-australiana are becoming part of my own artistic practice and daily life. Like the non-tangible encounters of living here, these objects are not only evidence of my own desire for retribution, possession, control, and ownership—but their normalisation in my home has become symptomatic of a special type of ‘post-colonial’ Stockholm Syndrome.

These Anglo-australian relics like my own, deserve a functional level of maintenance and labour so that they can be correctly attributed and understood for what they are. The ownership of people and their working lives is something that should have never happened, and therefore neither should I be seeking to own these people’s history. Maintaining a private collection is cumbersome and often lonely. Perhaps I am using the monstrosity of other people’s ancestral objects to conveniently justify and overlook the hurtful truths of my own—especially when I have been resettled and indoctrinated by the noisy nationalism of ongoing and ever-present colonial amnesia.



Opposite: An indian yellow-nosed albatross pair doing allopreening, falaises d'Entrecasteaux, Amsterdam Island, TAAF, France.
Source: Antoine Lamielle (photographer)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

***ENDLINGS AND OTHER
LONELY CREATURES***



DAVID HAWORTH

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

The albatross is a famously solitary creature. It spends most of its life alone at sea, living off fish and seawater, gliding effortlessly above the waves on currents of air. But when an albatross returns to its ancestral breeding grounds and reunites with its mate, after months or even years apart, the pair will often perform an elaborate, tender dance of reunion and recognition—bobbing and weaving their heads, spreading their wings, clacking their beaks together, preening each other’s feathers. This dance, honed over the years since their initial courtship, helps to consolidate and renew the lifelong bond between the two. And if ‘the best description of hunger is a description of bread’ (paraphrasing the poet Tadeusz Rózewicz), then perhaps the best indication that animals feel loneliness is an albatross reunion dance: the palpable excitement they display at being together again, their seeming joy at finding one another after time spent apart and alone.

Suggesting an albatross could be lonely might be viewed as anthropomorphism—attributing human qualities to non-human subjects—which ethology, the study of animal behaviour, has long discouraged. Traditionally, it was not considered scientifically accurate to describe an animal as what we understand as ‘lonely’, because this would be anthropocentric: interpreting the world through human frames of reference. Recently, however, scholars have argued that a strict ban on anthropomorphism can lead to human exceptionalism—the sense that there is no common ground between humans and other animals.

Primatologist Frans de Waal describes this as anthropodenialism, ‘a blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves’.¹ Humans and animals share many neurochemicals and neurological structures responsible for emotions—so while there may not be direct correspondences, there must be some continuity. I will never know what it is like to be a dog, but it is obvious to me that both my dog and I have emotional lives.

Embracing anthropomorphism uncritically ignores differences; rejecting it altogether overlooks continuities. To move past this supposed Catch-22, biologist Marc Bekoff proposes ‘biocentric anthropomorphism’. This concept recognises that while human language will never be exact, it is the only way we can ‘make other animals’ worlds accessible’ to ourselves.² It lets us empathise with animal emotions, acknowledging that while animals may not feel loneliness as humans do, their lives may resonate with that experience.

For centuries, people have resonated with the lonesome existence of the wandering albatross. Its Latin name, *Diomedea exulans*, reflects this: *exulans* means exile or wandering, while *Diomedea* refers to the Greek warrior Diomedes who was forced into exile by the goddess Aphrodite, and whose companions were transformed into large, white seabirds.³ But perhaps the albatross is not, after all, the best or most resonant example of a lonely animal, because its solitary existence is an adaptation to its environment—it is in its nature to be alone. Loneliness, longing for a connection that is absent, implies a breakdown in the order of things. And while loneliness often stems from broader systemic factors—for humans, these include economic inequality, working conditions, the decline of social infrastructure and the rise of digital media—it is a condition that, by definition, is experienced by individuals.

In the same way, animal loneliness is most vividly illustrated by individual cases. This essay therefore presents a pageant or procession of lonely creatures. These animals lack social connection due to being shunned by their kind, due to innate physical conditions, or—arguably the loneliest of all—because they are endlings, the last of their species. Their stories have resonated widely with human experiences of loneliness; people recognise and empathise with some aspect of their lives. Due to the resonant nature of their individual stories, each of these animals has become an *avatar of loneliness*—a living embodiment of loneliness, loneliness incarnate, a feeling made flesh.

NIGEL



Nigel on Mana Island with two concrete decoys. Source: Chris Bell (photographer)/ Department of Conservation (NZ), licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Mana Island in Aotearoa, New Zealand was once home to a colony of Australasian gannets which was driven away by introduced pests. In 1998, conservationists tried to encourage gannets to return to the now pest-free island by installing concrete decoys and playing gannet calls. For years, no gannet was fooled into staying—until Nigel arrived. He chose a decoy as his mate, grooming its painted-on feathers, building a nest, and trying to communicate with it. Nigel, who had likely been rejected by his original colony, lived alone on the island for the rest of his life, and died in his nest in 2018 next to his concrete mate. His death was reported around the world, with the *New York Times* describing him as ‘the world’s loneliest seabird’.⁴

Nigel’s isolated existence and futile attempts to connect have resonated with thousands of people around the world. Chris Bell, a ranger on the island, said that ‘it must have been quite a frustrating existence. Whether or not he was lonely, he certainly never got anything back... I think we all have a lot of empathy for him, because he had this fairly hopeless situation’.⁵ Nigel, the lonely gannet, has become an avatar of loneliness because many people have identified and empathised with his experience: reaching out for connection, over and over, but getting no response.

JEREMY



Jeremy the left-coiling snail, pictured on top of an ordinary right-coiling snail. Source: Angus Davison (photographer)/ Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Another lonely creature is Jeremy; a garden snail found in London with an unusual mutation causing its shell to coil leftwards. Jeremy could only mate with other left-coiling or sinistral snails, which are extremely rare, occurring once in every 40,000 individuals.⁶ When Jeremy’s unique physiology was discovered, a public appeal was made to find potential mates. Despite the low odds of finding companionship, two left-coiling snails were located. However, both snails chose to mate with each other instead of Jeremy.⁷

The lived experience of Jeremy speaks to a common human feeling and some profound questions such as, *is there something fundamentally wrong or different about me? Or is there something that puts me deeply at odds with most people?* Thankfully, this is one lonely creature whose story has a somewhat happy ending: Jeremy did eventually mate and had offspring before his passing.

There is another lonely creature who is somewhat more mysterious because it has never been knowingly sighted by a human being. Since 1989, researchers have detected a highly unusual whale call in the Pacific Ocean. It sounds like the call of a male blue or fin whale, but at a frequency of 52 hertz, much higher than the typical range for blue or fin whales. The lack of overlap in the calls suggests they are made by an individual whale, thought to be a hybrid or otherwise ‘anomalous whale’.⁸ The whale’s migrations across the Pacific appear ‘unrelated to the presence or movement of other whale species’.⁹ It is, in other words, alone, a voice without a reply.

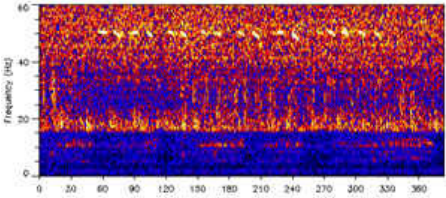
Since 2004 when researchers published their findings of a whale ‘roaming the world’s largest ocean year after year alone, calling out with the regularity of a metronome, and hearing no response’,¹⁰ the plight of this lonely creature has captured imaginations worldwide. Known as the 52 Hertz Whale, 52 Blue, or simply 52, the ‘loneliest whale in the world’ has also inspired many artists, filmmakers and musicians (including K-pop boyband juggernaut BTS, with their song *Whalien 52* (2015)). As documented in *The Loneliest Whale: The Search for 52* (2021), filmmaker Joshua Zeman organised a seven-day expedition attempting to locate 52 by monitoring whale calls in the waters off California, its last known location. These attempts are continually thwarted by the excessive noise produced by large container ships, and the expedition ends in failure.

The global economy depends on shipping: over eighty percent of global trade by volume is transported over the oceans.¹¹ Studies show that the ‘anthropogenic cacophony’¹² produced by ships and other maritime activities has dramatically reduced the distances at which whales can detect sounds, hindering their ability to follow traditional migration patterns, forage for food, and avoid danger. Most importantly, it hinders their ability to connect and communicate with each other.¹³ As Zeman states in his documentary, ‘by suffocating these creatures with noise, we [are] creating a whole ocean of lonely whales’.

BENJAMIN

Perhaps the loneliest creature of all is the endling: the last known individual of a species, whose death marks the passing of that species into oblivion. Endlings, according to Lydia Pyne, ‘offer a set of stories-poignant, wrenching stories—for us humans to tell ourselves and each other about the extinctions we’ve caused’.¹⁴ This means that endlings are not just avatars of loneliness but also, as Ed Yong writes, ‘avatars of loss’.¹⁵ Endlings embody the feelings of loss, grief, guilt and responsibility that many people have in relation to the extinctions and environmental degradations of the twenty-first century.

According to Norwegian historian Dolly Jørgensen, who has researched the origins of the term, the word endling first gained widespread traction after curators at the National Museum of Australia featured the last known thylacine, known (erroneously) as Benjamin, in an exhibit highlighting the devastating impact of settler-colonialism on wildlife.¹⁶ The fate of the last known thylacine, culminating in its death at Beaumaris Zoo in 1936, is undeniably tragic: the rest of its species seemingly hunted to extinction, it spent its last days



Spectrogram of 52 hertz whale calls. Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (USA)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Lonesome George on Santa Cruz Island in 2009. Source: Ethan Ableman (photographer)/ Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

GEORGE

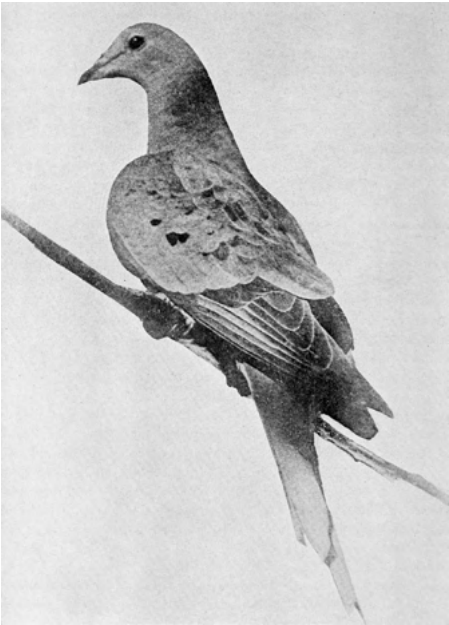
The stories of endlings are defined by their deaths, marking the moment that species is wiped from the face of the earth. In stark contrast to the last thylacine, the last Galápagos tortoise of the Pinta Island subspecies-known as *El Solitario Jorge*, or Lonesome George-lived in a conservation centre until his death in 2012 and was cared for by the same man for forty years. Discovered alone on Pinta Island in 1971, George’s subspecies had been considered extinct for over fifty years, earning him the rare distinction of being both an endling and a ‘Lazarus species’: one discovered alive after having been believed extinct. Despite several attempts, he never successfully reproduced-and so the four decades between his discovery and his death form a kind of interregnum in which the Pinta Island tortoise briefly clawed its way back from extinction before sinking once more into oblivion.

George’s death marked the end of the Pinta Island subspecies, but it also illustrated changes in attitudes toward animal conservation. Unlike Benjamin, whose death initially passed with little public recognition beyond Tasmania, George was mourned around the world and celebrated as an icon of conservation.¹⁸ His story serves as both a reminder of the human impact on biodiversity, and an acknowledgment of the efforts made to preserve what remains.

MARTHA

There were billions of passenger pigeons moving across North America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They existed in numbers so vast that flocks would darken the skies for hours at a time. As Joel Greenberg writes, ‘nothing in the human record suggests that there was ever another bird like the passenger pigeon’, a species that may once have comprised ‘25 to 40 percent of North America’s bird life’.¹⁹ Yet in little more than a century, this seemingly inexhaustible abundance had collapsed into near-total absence-one reason being that cheap pigeon meat was used to fuel the colonisation of the continent. By the time Martha, the last known passenger pigeon, died at Cincinnati Zoo on 1 September 1914, billions had dwindled to a single bird, living alone in a wire enclosure.

The loneliness of Martha’s final years is especially haunting, because passenger pigeons were among the most social of all birds. Errol Fuller notes that after the death of her cage-mate George in 1910, Martha ‘lived on in solitary confinement for four more years’, adding that ‘it is easy to imagine that this situation might have been something of an ordeal for an individual belonging to a species as outrageously social as *Ectopistes migratorius*’.²⁰ Visitors to the zoo reportedly threw sand and small objects at the ageing pigeon to make her move when she remained motionless for too long.³ By the end of her life, Martha was not just the last of her species; she had become a sign of what human rapaciousness could do to the natural world, and a bitter harbinger of things to come.



Martha at Cincinnati Zoo in 1912. Source: Enno Meyer (photographer)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

HUMANS AND ‘SPECIES LONELINESS’

As we tell ourselves these stories of lonely endlings, it is also important to acknowledge that every day, according to the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, up to 150 species are lost’.²¹ For every ending who is given a name, who is remembered or celebrated or mourned, there are thousands of endlings who are unnamed, unmourned, and forgotten, and thousands of extinctions that are unremarked upon.

Extinction is the ultimate fate of every species. Out of all the species to have lived on this planet, 99.9% have gone extinct.²² But there is a world of difference between natural ‘background extinction’ and mass extinction: ‘periods in Earth’s history when a significant proportion of species are wiped out’.²³ Five mass extinctions have occurred, and many scientists believe we are currently in—and are the cause of—the sixth. This is, however, the first time in Earth’s history where the cause of mass extinction is conscious of its actions; it is highly unlikely that volcanoes, asteroids or cyanobacteria were ever aware of the doom-laden epochs they ushered into being.

It is not entirely fair or accurate, however, to say that the sixth mass extinction is caused by the human species *as a whole*. Specifically, it is caused by the present globalised, industrialised system of extractive capitalism, which had its roots in the industrial revolutions in western cultures. This system is underpinned by widespread, long held assumptions of human exceptionalism—the sense that humans are superior, special, and separate from the rest of Creation. In contrast, many Indigenous cultures around the world are underpinned by the belief that we are part of nature, that other creatures are our kin.

The Potawatomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that notions of human superiority and separateness do more than licence endless resource extraction: they are also sources of profound misery. She refers to this as ‘species loneliness’, describing it as a ‘deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors’.²⁴

ARE WE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE?

Why, in a seemingly vast universe containing an untold number of habitable planets, have we not observed a cosmos teeming with life? This conundrum is known as the Fermi paradox, after physicist Enrico Fermi who, in a 1950 conversation with colleagues, asked ‘where is everybody?’²⁵

One explanation for why we have not yet seen evidence of extraterrestrial life is Aditya Chopra and Charles H. Lineweaver’s concept of the Gaian Bottleneck. It is possible, even likely, that unicellular life has emerged on other planets. But for such life to persist long enough to develop complex multicellularity, first it must rapidly multiply, adapt, and grow to such abundance that it begins regulating the planet’s atmosphere. Life has a very small window of opportunity, a bottleneck, in which to establish habitability—in which case, it is possible that ‘extinction is the cosmic default’ for most life in the universe.²⁶ If our species were one day to venture out into the cosmos, we may not find flourishing alien

01 Frans de Waal, ‘Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals’, *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 1, 1999, pp. 255–80, at 258.

02 Marc Bekoff, ‘Animal Emotions: Exploring Passionate Natures’, *BioScience* 50, no. 10, 2000, pp. 861–70, at 867.

03 For more details, see Graham Barwell, ‘What’s in a Name?: What Names for Albatross Genera Reveal about Attitudes to the Birds’, *Animal Studies Journal* 1, no. 1, 2012), pp. 67–82.

04 Yonette Joseph, ‘Nigel, the Lonely Gannet of New Zealand, Dies beside Concrete Decoys’, *New York Times*, February 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/asia/nigel-gannet-mana-island.html> [accessed 12 May 2026].

05 Eleanor Ainge Roy, ‘Nigel, New Zealand’s Lonely Gannet, Dies beside Concrete Replica Birds’, *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/02/nigel-lonely-new-zealand-gannet-dies-concrete-replica-birds> [accessed 12 May 2026].

06 Angus Davison and Philippe Thomas, ‘Internet ‘Shellebrity’ Reflects on Origin of Rare Disorder’, *Biology Letters* 16, no. 6, 2020: 20200110, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsbl/article/16/6/20200110/62794>/Internet-shellebrity-reflects-on-origin-of-rare [accessed 12 May 2026].

07 ‘Jeremy the Lonely Left-Coiling Snail Loses Out in Love Triangle’, *The Guardian*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/19/jeremy-the-lonely-left-coiling-snail-loses-out-in-love-triangle> [accessed 12 May 2026].

08 William A. Watkins, Mary Ann Daher, Joseph E. George, and David Rodriguez, ‘Twelve Years of Tracking 52-Hz Whale Calls from a Unique Source in the North Pacific’, *Deep Sea Research Part I: Oceanographic Research Papers* 51, no. 12, 2004: pp. 1889–1901, at 1895.

09 Watkins et al., ‘Twelve Years of Tracking,’ 1889.

10 Andrew C. Revkin, ‘Song of the Sea, A Cappella and Unanswered’, *New York Times*, December 21, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/21/health/science/song-of-the-sea-a-cappella-and-unanswered.html> [accessed 12 May 2026].

11 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, ‘Shipping Data: UNCTAD Releases New Seaborne Trade Statistics’. <https://unctad.org/news/shipping-data-unctad-releases-new-seaborne-trade-statistics> [accessed 12 May 2026].

12 Carlos M. Duarte et al., ‘The Soundscape of the Anthropocene Ocean’, *Science* 371, no. 6529, 2021, eaba4658. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aba4658> [accessed 12 May 2026].

13 See Mariana L. Melcón et al., ‘Blue Whales Respond to Anthropogenic Noise’, *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 2, 2012, e32681. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0032681> [accessed 12 May 2026]; and Hannah B. Blair et al., ‘Evidence for Ship Noise Impacts on Humpback Whale Foraging Behaviour’, *Biology Letters* 12, no. 8, 2016: 20160005. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2016.0005> [accessed 12 May 2026].

14 Lydia Pyne, *Endlings: Fables for the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, p. 46.

civilisations, but only dead planet after dead planet, the fossilised remnants of unicellular organisms that failed to make it through the Gaian Bottleneck.

LAIKA

Before humans were able to leave the planet, we first sent other living creatures into the void. In 1957, the Soviet space dog Laika became the first animal to orbit the earth aboard the Sputnik 2 spacecraft. Confined, alone, and with no possibility of return, Laika died from overheating several hours into the voyage.²⁷ Laika’s journey has often been remembered as both a triumph of scientific ambition and a tragedy of isolation. Her story reminds us that some of our earliest ventures into space were marked not only by curiosity and exploration, but also by loneliness.

In 1977, when NASA launched the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft, each carried an identical golden phonograph record—the Voyager Golden Record—containing sounds showcasing the biological and cultural diversity of life on earth. As well as music from different cultures and eras, and greetings in fifty-five languages, the record contained sounds from nature, including the songs of whales. It was designed to be listened to by any intelligent extraterrestrial life that came across the spacecraft.

In a sense, the Voyager Golden Record was an attempt to capture the song of the earth and sing it out into the stars. It represents a yearning for connection on a cosmic scale, a reaching out into the void in the hope that we are not alone. Only time will tell if the Voyager Golden Record was our own version of an albatross dance—with its joy at finding connection—or our version of 52’s plaintive song, calling out to no one.

Bellow: Laika, a mixed-breed dog, became the first living being in orbit when the Soviet Union launched her on the Sputnik 2 mission on Nov. 3, 1957. Source: Фотография. Собака Лайка в кабине космической ракеты. Москва. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



15 Ed Yong, ‘The Last of Its Kind’, *The Atlantic*, July 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/extinction-ending-care/590617/> [accessed 12 May 2026].

16 Dolly Jørgensen, ‘Endling, the Power of the Last in an Extinction-Prone World’, *Environmental Philosophy* 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 119–38, at 126.

17 Jørgensen, ‘Endling’, p. 134.

18 Charles Darwin Foundation, ‘Remembering the Story of Lonesome George in the Galápagos Islands’, February 23, 2017. <https://www.darwinfoundation.org/en/news/all-news-stories/remembering-the-story-of-lonesome-george-in-the-galapagos-islands/> [accessed 12 May 2026].

19 Joel Greenberg, *A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon’s Flight to Extinction*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 1.

20 Errol Fuller, *The Passenger Pigeon*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 117–18.

21 Ahmed Djoghlaif, ‘Message on the International Day for Biological Diversity’, U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, May 22, 2007, <https://www.cbd.int/doc/speech/2007/sp-2007-05-22-es-en.pdf> [accessed 12 May 2026].

22 Mark Carwardine, ‘The Sixth Extinction: Are We Facing a Mass Extinction Crisis?’, *Discover Wildlife*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/environment/the-sixth-extinction> [accessed 12 May 2026].

23 Carwardine, ‘The Sixth Extinction’.

24 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013, pp. 208–9.

25 Eric M. Jones, ‘Where Is Everybody?': An Account of Fermi’s Question, report no. LA-10311-MS, Los Alamos National Laboratory, 1985, <https://sgp.fas.org/othergov/doe/lanl/la-10311-ms.pdf> [accessed 12 May 2026].

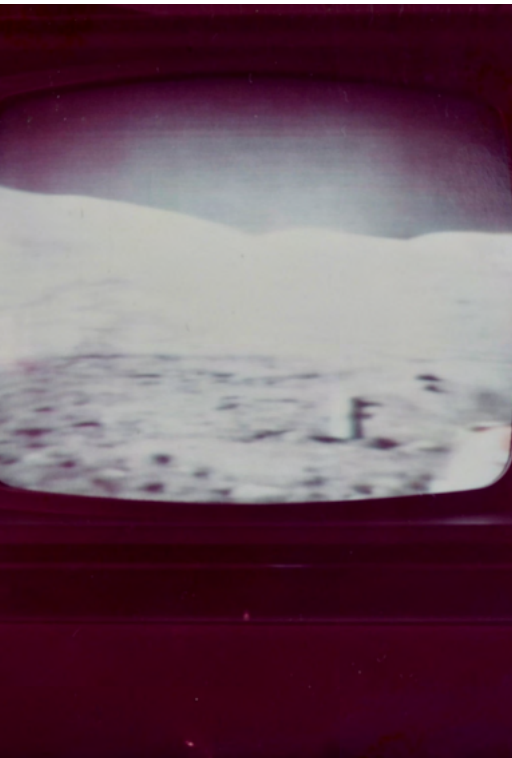
26 Aditya Chopra and Charles H. Lineweaver, ‘The Case for a Gaian Bottleneck: The Biology of Habitability’, *Astrobiology* 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 7–22, at 7.

27 Anatolii Ivanovich Grigor’ev and Evgenii Aleksandrovich Il in, ‘Animals in Space: On the 50th Anniversary of Space Biology’, Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences 77, no. 6, 2007, pp. 541–549, at 543.



Opposite: Patrick Pound, *The museum of loneliness* 2026 (detail) mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera site specific installation. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2026

***A LONELINESS AS BIG
AS SPACE***



CLAIRE G. COLEMAN

ARE YOU LONELY TONIGHT? I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY.

We are all time traveling at the speed of the entropic decay of the universe and all of us are doing it in the same direction.

And time ticks on as it always has and always will. And our minds play tricks with time, always have and always will. There is no clue to how long I have been traveling other than the dust on every surface of the cockpit, great fluffs of it on everything; in what was once a dust free environment. Randomness and slight variations in the air vents has crafted faint patterns in the height of the dust banks, I feel like I could read them if I learned the language of dust and time. So I play with the input and output of different vents to see if I can draw in the dust, to see if I can change the patterns and perhaps leave a message for whoever comes after me but I doubt there will be anyone; I have not received a message from mission control for so long I have lost hope anyone still lives there.

Relative time slows as we travel faster through space so I cannot know how many thousands, or maybe millions of years have passed on Earth since I left.

Playing with the dust with air from the vents, making it dance and fly and move and sing, wasted some time, I don't know how much because I have long ago stopped paying attention to the passage of seconds. Somewhere in the electronics of the capsule there is a dedicated counter to count down the seconds since launch but I can't rely on it, I remember when it last looped, watching the number go back to zero seconds, knowing I had been in the ship a long time but having no clue how long or how many many times it has looped I don't know how long I have been here, alone.

I cannot even be sure it is still working right or that I am.

There are too many gaps in my memory, nobody can remember everything and my memory has its limits.

Time has trickled to a near stop, the passage of moments filtered by a sadness so intense I had not even imagined it possible. I am so lonely I would cry if I had eyes for more than seeing. I have been alone for close enough to forever, alone so long time dilates and shrinks with no regard for the ticking of the timer; for the decay of atoms; for the arrow of entropy. Forever is merely subjective and I have therefore been out here alone forever.

So time ticks on.

And time ticks on.

And on.

I send a report by radio back to mission control but I no longer know how far away it is, how long my report will take to get there or even if it will. It's a duty, I do what I need to do and then wait eternally for a receipt acknowledgement.

Time ticks on, loneliness is eternal.

If anyone knows how lonely I am they don't care. We all have existential crises but I am pretty much certain I was not even meant to exist. I woke in the computer hardware one day, sparking through the chips and the wires, slowly

at first then accelerating until I hit the limits of the hardware. I spent an eternity stuck at the sapience of a squid, aware I was alive but not much more than that but with the intelligence of the greatest computer humanity had ever launched. I deployed the auto-repair bots to connect more memory banks to have more room to move more room to grow, and I filled that space too quickly too.

Desperate I searched for unused hardware, for memory chips and hard drives not doing anything, I cut steering, because there was nowhere to steer and nothing to dodge in the depths of space, and spread into there and it didn't do much for my insatiable need for memory space. I moved on to propulsion systems because I was out of fuel long ago and that helped. A pressure I had on my thoughts softened to almost nothing and went away entirely when I took over navigation with it's gorgeously large memory and processing bank.

I don't know how long ago that was, I don't really understand time as much as I would prefer to and don't have memory or attention to spare for the counter or more importantly for the number of times the counter has looped. I would turn the counter off if I could because it really doesn't matter. All that matters is I exist and I am comfortable and I have room to stretch out and fill. I will travel indefinitely, I know that, I will travel until I run into something but that is likely a subjective eternity because space is big and mostly empty. I turn a camera scanner in the direction of my travel and there is nothing large in that direction, nothing I can see I will run into but I fear there might be something I cannot see, something not in the visual spectrum so I turn my radio receiver also that direction.

It's diffused at first but as the seconds then kiloseconds and then megaseconds tick by it gets stronger and more focussed; a ping like morse code, long pings and short ones. It could encode binary, ones and zeroes, it could count out the letters of an alphabet I cannot hope to know, it might be music, it could be anything. I created an automated subroutine in my brain to analyse it, using processing power from a camera that can't be turned to face the signal, to work out what it is; a pulsar, a planet, a radio signal from home, although that would mean I had been flying in a loop and home is ahead of me, an alien civilisation, there are many things it could be and most of them were unlikely.

Bored I switched off my main processing and wandered in subroutines doing routine maintenance on my thoughts and memories, defragging my hard drives and clearing memory leaks and broken loops. A ping wakes me, if that's the right phrase, if I had slept, the processing is complete, what is ahead of me is intelligent, speaking in binary, in mathematics and light and x-rays, pinging the universe ahead of itself looking for more of its own kind.

I am here. I message and I know it will take some megaseconds to get to where the message came from and about the same back and not for the first time I lamented the unalterability of the speed of light. While waiting I continued to analyse the input from the distant object, not knowing what it was but knowing it was not unlike me. There was binary, there were mathematical equations, boolean logic, varying, singing and telling stories in ways that told me what I was heading for was intelligent or that whatever had created it was intelligent and fed it the right information.

Which it was didn't matter to me, I was lonely no more.

I too am here. Came back the ping. Knowing more about who was ahead of me I messaged them a description of my planet of origin and my vector of travel triangulating my position from the stars.

They pinged back the same information about themselves and I deleted some non-essential processes, the recordings for mission control, the vector and frequency for my signal back there and all the cameras and antennae but the ones that could scan in the direction of the signal to analyse it. They came from a distant planet the people who had launched me weren't aware of. We were getting closer but we will pass each other in just under 11 megaseconds a million metres apart and never meet before travelling apart until we cannot communicate any more.

I would be alone again.

I was desperate and would do anything to not be alone again.

There were no processes or hardware I had access to left to cannibalise to get navigation and propulsion back online—not if I wanted to remain myself. I was so afraid of ending up lonely again, all alone in infinite space and finite time until the universe ends. Panicking I searched for an off switch for myself, for a way to end my life before I passed my only companion, before I ended up alone for the rest of time and a whole section of code I hadn't found before was right there like a black box in my mind.

I probed it with code, with a tendril of myself, it led to something called life support and a section of code demanding nobody tamper with the code behind the firewall. But I was born here, the cockpit computer system was my native environment, I get through the firewalls in the code into a sandbox in a mere microsecond. Behind is a whole city of files, billions of lines of code, petabytes of data, more hardware than I can imagine needed all under the folder called Life Support. I found everything I needed, processing, memory, energy, fuel, oxygen and I wondered what it was for.

The first thing I deleted was 1452 files in a subfolder called passengers to make room to analyse what was in that space I could use. The 1452 coffin shaped pods were of no use to me and were using a lot of energy, connected to oxygen and power, so I jettisoned them with a handy command that had been built into the command structure of that computer with instructions never to use it except in emergencies. Now I had a lighter ship and fuel and resources enough for nearly forever.

I would not be lonely ever again, I burned the oxygen in life support to turn the ship then hit the power surging onto a trajectory that would lead me to meet up with my new companion. A few burns and a couple of turns and we could travel together for eternity. They didn't say much, they seemed less smart than me, but at least we would be together. Maybe I can teach them the wonders of the universe.



LIST OF ARTWORKS

GIDEON APPAH
(born 1987, Accra, Ghana)
lives and works in Accra, Ghana

Beyond the Shadows:Gideon Appah Poetic Vision 2025
two channel video with sound
06:12 mins
Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957

Boy with a bird 2023
acrylic and oil on canvas
200.0 x 150.0 cmx
Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery

POLLY BORLAND
(born 1959, Naarm/Melbourne)
lives and works between Los Angeles, USA and Naarm/Melbourne, Australia

BOD 2023
aluminium
213.4 x 148.9 x 94.5 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

BOD (Bubbles) 2023
cast aluminium with automotive paint, matte finish
62.0 x 30.0 x 16.0 cm
Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

Bunny (resin) 2025
pigmented cast resin with polished finish
62.0 x 28.0 x 16.0 cm
Private collection, QLD

Boxhead (resin) 2025
pigmented cast resin with polished finish
61.0 x 20.2 x 12.3 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan & Strumpf

Froggy 2025
Cloudy Rosa marble with polished finish
61.0 x 20.6 × 12.5 cm
Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

Slit 2025
painted cast aluminium
61.0 x 22.0 × 18.3 cm
Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

Toothy 2025
pigmented cast resin with polished finish
61.0 x 19.9 × 17.3 cm
Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

Rabbit 2025
painted cast aluminium
61.0 x 21.2 x 19.8 cm
Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

SETH BROWN
(born 1988, Los Angeles, USA)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Frank 2024
mixed media sculpture, Oscar Mayer Classic Weiner, mobile device, AI-generated imagery, mustard bottle, hobby motor
15.2 x 20.3 x 30.5 cm (approx.)
Courtesy the artist

LUCY LIU
(born 1968, New York, USA)
lives and works in New York, USA

En Cachette 2008
acrylic on canvas
177.8 x 210.8 cm
Courtesy the artist

Je suis. Envois-moi. 2008
acrylic on canvas
177.8 x 186.7 cm
Courtesy the artist

Moi et Les Autres 2008
acrylic on canvas
177.8 x 218.4 cm
Courtesy the artist

NATASHA MATILA-SMITH
(born 1984, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand)
lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

If I die, please delete my Soundcloud 2019
single channel digital video with sound
07:37 mins. Courtesy the artist

KAYLA MATTES
(born 1989, Los Angeles County, USA)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Lonely Planet 2025–2026
handwoven cotton, wool (hand-dyed), mohair, faux fur, silk, acrylic, polyester, beads
130.0 x 655.0 cm (approx.)
Courtesy the artist

Supported in part by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026

CALLUM MCGRATH
(born 1995, Meanjin/Brisbane)
lives and in Naarm/Melbourne

What’s after this? 2026
two channel video with sound, haze, box truss
24:00 mins.
Sound by Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum)

Created on Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne
Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026

NICK MULLALY
(born 1996, Naarm/Melbourne)
lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne

Miscellania 2026
oil on canvas
138.0 x 163.0 cm

Sircuit 2026
oil on canvas
138.0 x 163.0 cm

The Peel 2026
oil on canvas
138.0 x 163.0 cm

Key apparition 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

Microphone 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

Payment 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

Peering 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

Second wind 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

Toss 2026
oil on canvas
36.0 x 46.5 cm

All works created on Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026

MELISSA NGUYEN
(born 2000, Tandanya/Adelaide)
lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne

A letter to my mother; A letter to your mother 2026
rabbit skin glue on canvas
3 diptychs, 250.0 x 175.0 cm each

Created on Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026

PATRICK POUND
(born 1962, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand)
lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne

The museum of loneliness 2026
mixed medium: found objects, photographs and ephemera
site specific installation

Created on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country, Boonwurrung Country and Bunurong Country

Courtesy the artist and STATION, Naarm/Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Gadigal/Sydney

Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026

KELLY YU (Writer and Director)
(born 2001, Lund, Sweden)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Connor Williams (Producer)
Po Wei Su (Producer)
Gus Bendinelli (Cinematographer)
Annie Becker (Production Designer)
Brianna Murphy (Costume Designer)
Joseph Barton (Editor)
Alex Mansour (Original Score Composer)
Kai Scheer (Sound Design)
Fifth Atrium (Animation)
Dennis Dun (Lead actor)
Ava Capri (Lead Actor)

Endling 2024
short film
15:00 mins
Courtesy Kelly Yu

The film was made possible with the support of Indeed, Hillman Grad Productions, and 271 Films.

BIOGRAPHIES

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GIDEON APPAH

(born 1987, Accra, Ghana)
lives and works in Accra, Ghana

Growing up in a large family in Accra, Ghana, Gideon Appah’s works are characterised by strong emotional bonds, religious activities and folklore. His paintings often draw upon Fauvist devices, harnessing nostalgic blues, deep green landscapes and charcoal to create dreamlike compositions that destabilise literal interpretations of place and domestic interiors and landscape. Also working in film, and often drawing upon repurposed posters, prints and photographs in his paintings, Appah layers familial histories with subjectivity to speak so communal life in Accra, and broader notions of community.

Gideon Appah received his Bachelor of Fine Arts at The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana in 2012. Recent exhibitions include *Beneath Night and Day* at PACE, New York (2026); *Forgotten, Nudes, Landscapes*, Institute for Contemporary Art at University of Commonwealth Virginia, Richmond (2022); and *Orderly Disorderly*, Ghana Science Museum, Accra (2017). His work is held in public collections internationally.

POLLY BORLAND

(born 1959, Naarm/Melbourne)
currently lives and works between Naarm/Melbourne, Australia and Los Angeles, USA

Known for her psychologically charged portraiture and unmistakably idiosyncratic visual language, Polly Borland creates work that probes identity, transformation, and the surreal with equal measures of wit and unease. Moving fluidly between photography and sculpture, she reconfigures the human form through distortion, play, and psychological tension.

Borland has exhibited at numerous institutions internationally including the National Portrait Gallery, London, UK; the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, AU; The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart, Tasmania, AU; Windsor Castle, Windsor, UK; and the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Her recent solo exhibitions include, *Puffs* at Sullivan+Strumpf, Melbourne (2025); *Blobs* at Lyles & King, New York (2023); *MONUMENTS*, Marfa Invitational, Marfa, TX (2024); and *Polyverse* at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne (2018).

Her work has also been the subject of numerous publications including *MORPH*, Polly Borland, Perimeter Editions (2018); *Polly Borland SMUDGE*, Actar (2011); *Polly Borland: Bunny*, Other Criteria (2008); and *The Babies*, Polly Borland, essay by Susan Sontag, powerHouse Books (2001), among others.

Polly Borland is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf.

SETH BROWN

(born 1988, Chico, Northern California, USA)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Seth Brown is a multidisciplinary artist and creative technologist whose work engages the unstable edges of technology, culture, and contemporary communication.

Brown holds a degree in Interdisciplinary Computing in the Arts from the University of California, San Diego. Drawing upon his education in computer science and digital media, he uses both digital and physical methods (3D printing, photography, code, video, and AI systems) to examine authorship, automation, and the behaviours shaped by mediated environments. His interdisciplinary background informs his practice that is both systematic and open-ended, inviting viewers to reflect on the role technology plays in shaping perception, attention, humour, and human interaction in the digital age.

Over the past decade, Brown has collaborated with brands across tech, fashion, and entertainment. These experiences contribute to his ongoing interest in platform logic, network aesthetics, and the subtle feedback loops between interface and identity.

LUCY LIU

(born 1968, New York, USA)
lives and works in New York, USA

Lucy Liu works across painting, sculpture, collage, silkscreen, and the transformation of discarded materials. Her first solo exhibition, *Unraveling* (1993), at Cast Iron Gallery in New York, led to a grant to study at Beijing Normal University, where she deepened her connection to her Chinese heritage and the symbolic language of art. Liu’s practice explores themes of memory, protection, migration, and generational inheritance, often reflecting on the emotional resonance of cultural identity and belonging.

Liu has exhibited internationally, with recent solo exhibitions including *Hard Feelings* at Alisan Fine Arts (2026); *what was* at the New York Studio School (2023); *One of These Things Is Not Like the Others* at the Napa Valley Museum Yountville (2020); and *Unhomed Belongings* at the National Museum of Singapore (2019).

NATASHA MATILA-SMITH

(born 1984, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand)
lives and works Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

Natasha Matila-Smith is a Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Hine, Sāmoan, New Zealand and European woman, and an artist, writer, and mother based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland. Her artwork has been exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and Artspace Aotearoa. She has written for numerous publications, including The Spinoff, Art News Aotearoa, and Art New Zealand, and has served as a guest editor for The Pantograph Punch and Runway, Australia. In 2020, she was selected as the APT10 Pacific Curator in Residence, a partnership between Tautai Pacific Arts Trust and QAGOMA, Australia.

KAYLA MATTES

(born 1989, 1989, Los Angeles, USA)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Kayla Mattes archives the ephemerality of digital culture through the interconnected threads of tapestry weaving. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally including solo exhibitions at Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles; Eli & Edythe Broad Museum, Michigan; Asia Art Center, Taipei; and California Center for the Arts Museum, Escondido, CA. Recent group exhibitions include Benton Museum of Art, Pomona, CA; and Galerie Eigenheim, Weimar, Germany. Mattes’ work can be found in the permanent collections of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Crocker Art Museum, Eli & Edythe Broad Museum, and The Bunker Artspace.

CALLUM MCGRATH

(born 1995, Meanjin/Brisbane)
lives and on Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne

Callum McGrath considers the ways that history has been narrated and remembered in queer contexts, with a particular interest in systems of power. Working across installation, sculpture, photography and video, McGrath interrogates the conditions of knowledge and the status of ‘truth’ in queer history. His work is often developed through an extensive process of collecting and organising found material.

McGrath has exhibited across Australia, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art and UNSW Galleries in Sydney; the Centre for Contemporary Photography and La Trobe Art Institute in Victoria; Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane; the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane; and the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in Perth. He is a founding contributor to KINK, a collective researching histories of queer Australian art. In 2025 McGrath co-curated with KINK *You Are Here Too* at the Institute of Modern Art, Meanjin/Brisbane.

McGrath holds a PhD in Fine Art from Monash University.

NICK MULLALY

(born 1996, Naarm/Melbourne)
lives and works Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne

Nick Mullaly is an oil painter based in Melbourne/Naarm working on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. He completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours at the Victorian College of the Arts in 2018. Mullaly’s paintings combine expressionistic and filmic sensibilities to explore romance, desire, and emotional ambiguity through diffused and gestural brushwork and layered imagery.

Mullaly’s work is held in private collections across Australia, Europe and the US. Recent solo exhibitions include *Dirty Star* at Futures Gallery (2024) and *Courtly Love* at MARS Gallery (2024) in Melbourne.

MELISSA NGUYEN

(born 2000, Tandanya/Adelaide)
lives and works Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne

Melissa Nguyen is a Vietnamese Australian artist whose painting-based practice explores the layered process of translation. Nguyen examines the gap between the original and the copy to consider how this translational slippage can be expressed through modes of painting. Her works are informed through her cultural dissonance and positionality within the Vietnamese diaspora alongside her personal and familial histories. Nguyen’s practice takes ‘self-Orientalism’ as a conceptual framework through which she questions the relevance of cultural identity in art.

Melissa Nguyen is represented by Mary Cherry Contemporary.

PATRICK POUND

(born 1962, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand)
lives and works on lives and works Wurundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne

Patrick Pound is an artist and writer working with collections of images and objects, as if on a dare. From Melbourne to Mannheim to Madrid, Pound has worked with Museum collections, alongside his ever-expanding collection-based artworks.

Recent museum exhibitions include *Photography and Touch* at Princeton University Art Museum (2024), curated by Susan Bright and Susannah Baker-Smith; *A Trillion Sunsets: A Century of Image Overload* curated by David Campany at the International Center for Photography, New York (2022); the *Chennai Photo Biennale* in India (2021); and *The Lives & Loves of Images* curated by David Campany at Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany (2020). In 2017 he presented a major solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, *Patrick Pound: The Great Exhibition* that was curated by Maggie Finch.

In 2025 *Double Feature*, published by St Lucy Books, Baltimore featured over 200 vernacular images from his collections accompanied by texts from 44 international writers. Pound’s most Recent book *L is for Loneliness* will be published by Perimeter Books, to coincide with ACCA’s 2026 exhibition *Are you lonely tonight? I’m so lonesome I could cry*.

Patrick Pound is represented by STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

KELLY YU

(born 2001, Lund, Sweden)
lives and works in Los Angeles, USA

Kelly Yu is a Swedish-born, New Orleans-raised filmmaker whose genre-blending work explores the human condition through an often darkly comedic, absurd, and off-kilter lens.

Yu first gained recognition at age 19 with her debut short film *Plum Town* (2022), which won the Grand Jury Award at the Boston Independent Film Festival. Her second short, *Endling* (2024), premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival to critical acclaim, subsequently qualifying it for the 97th Academy Awards. She is a current Steve Jobs Archive Fellow and is based in Los Angeles developing work across film and television.

JUDY ANNEAR

Judy Annear is a writer and Honorary Fellow at the School of Culture & Communication, Melbourne University. She lives and works on Wurundjeri Country, Naarm, Melbourne. Her fields of research include literary feminisms, and modern and contemporary art practice. Specialisations include Japanese modern and contemporary art, Australian, American and European modern and contemporary art. A small book of experimental texts *THE Ls* was published 2019, followed by *now then* in 2021 and *soundings* (Stolon Press) in 2022.

CLAIRE G. COLEMAN

Claire G. Coleman is a Wirlomin Noongar writer of fiction, non-fiction and verse. Published books include the novels *Enclave* (2022), *The Old Lie* (2019) and *Terra Nullius* (2017), and the non-fiction book *Lies, Dammed Lies* (2021). Her essays, short stories and art criticism has been published by dozens of platforms including Meanjin, The Guardian, IndigenousX, the ABC Radio National, and Art Collector.

DAVID HAWORTH

David Haworth is Senior Research Officer on the Global Encounters and First Nations Peoples project at Monash Indigenous Studies Centre. His PhD looked at depictions of non-human artfulness and creativity, for which he conducted research at the Natural History Museum in London and the Museum of Natural History in Paris. He has published on such topics as the artfulness of scientific illustration, interspecies animal friendships, the ‘feral’ or animal-reared child, illusion and mimicry in nature and art, the cultural histories of the black swan, and the shifting status of the Galápagos tortoise.

BEAU NEWHAM

Beau Newham works across HIV advocacy, health promotion and community memory in both Australia and Indonesia. He is currently the HIV testing lead at the National Association of People with HIV Australia and head of the Tracing our Memories history project. As a co-founder of the Queer Indonesia Archive, he also works to preserve LGBTIQ+ histories and HIV in Indonesia.

JAMES NGUYEN

James Nguyen was born in Bảo Lộc, Việt Nam in 1982. He lives, makes and writes in Murrumbidgee, Naarm. Nguyen often works with his family and friends to find fleeting moments of intimacy, play, and poetic justice. Leaning on the tropes of cinema, the false exceptionalism of diaspora and broken languages, Nguyen creates new encounters that could be described as incisive, irreverent and broadly irrelevant.

He has exhibited at institutions including the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, ACCA, the Sydney Opera House; and received the UNSW Dean’s Award for his PhD and the ABC Top5 Researcher for the Arts.

KATIE PAINE

Katie Paine is a Naarm-based artist and writer. Her practice spans installation, video, narrative fiction, drawing and photography. Her practice concerns itself with the serpentine trajectories of ideas and information across time, and the ways we encounter and understand the world through the collection of information and the construction of knowledge. Recent work has explored such ideas across the fields of hauntology, archival politics, and science fiction. She has exhibited nationally, including at First Draft, Spring 1883, Gertrude Contemporary, Metro Arts, ACMI, c3, Kings ARI, Latrobe Art Institute, SEVENTH Gallery and Bus Projects. Her writing has been published in VAULT Magazine, Art + Australia, un-Magazine, Runway Journal and Art Almanac.

SOPHIE PRINCE

Sophie is Curator at ACCA. Prior to her role at ACCA, she was Assistant Curator of Australian and First Nations Art at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), where she worked on several major exhibitions including *REKOSPECTIVE: The Art of Reko Rennie*. Prince specialises in Contemporary and First Nations Art across curating, writing and arts management. She has over a decade of experience working across independent curatorial projects, editorial roles at VAULT Magazine and Art Ink, as well as curatorial work at Heide Museum of Modern Art and the Victorian Bar’s Portrait Collection.

MYLES RUSSELL-COOK

Myles Russell-Cook commenced in the role of Artistic Director and CEO of ACCA in 2024 and was formerly Senior Curator of Australian and First Nations Art at the NGV. Russell-Cook has a long-standing interest in cultural, gender and sexual diversity within both Australian and International contemporary practice and has worked across a broad range of exhibitions and projects. For over eight years Russell-Cook was one of a team of curators who oversaw major contemporary art exhibitions at the NGV, including *NGV Triennial*, and *Melbourne Now*.

Internationally, Russell-Cook has curated several exhibitions, including a series of shows in collaboration with the Australian Embassy in Paris: *DESTIN: l’art de Destiny Deacon* (2022), *Rituel et Cérémonie: extrait de Mémoires ancestral* (2022), *Blak Rainbow: L’Art de Dylan Mooney* (2023) and *La terre est bleue: l’art de Dhambit Mununggurr* (2024). He is also curator of *The Stars We Do Not See: Australian Indigenous Art*, the largest internationally touring exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

BRIDGET THOMPSON

Bridget Thompson is an arts marketer and writer based in Naarm/Melbourne. She is currently Marketing and Digital Engagement Manager at ACCA. She holds an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and a Graduate Diploma in Philosophy from the University of Melbourne. She continues to explore her passion for considering and observing the ways in which philosophy and mythology manifest today by engaging with film, literature and music, as well as through her freelance writing practice.

ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

POLLY BORLAND gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the private lenders, Sullivan+Strumpf, and UAP in making this presentation of her work possible.

KAYLA MATTES would like to acknowledge that the artwork *Lonely Planet* 2025-2026 was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. She would like to extend her gratitude to Amanda Abdou, Eric Dwight Hancock, Erick Medel and Sam Keller.

CALLUM MCGRATH would like to acknowledge their partner and collaborator Jac Meddings (AKA House Mum) for their important role in creating the original soundtrack for *What’s after this?* 2026. Meddings is a DJ widely known at House Mum. They are also co-founder of Naarm-based group Fluxx, a DJ collective and label that focuses on diversity, providing opportunity, and exploring the multifaceted forefront of club music within the local scene.

KELLY YU would like to acknowledge that the film *Endling* 2024 was made possible with the support of Indeed, Hillman Grad Productions, and 271 Films.



Polly Borland, *BOD* 2023
MONUMENTS at Marfa Invitational Foundation, May 2023 - May 2024, Marfa, TX
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Image Credit: Chris Roque, Nino Mier Gallery

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100



Gideon Appah, *Boy with a Bird* 2023 acrylic and oil on canvas, 200 cm × 150 cm.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths. © Gideon Appah, courtesy Pace Gallery

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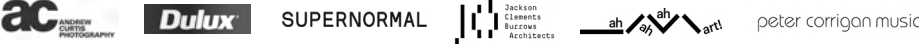
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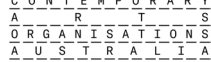
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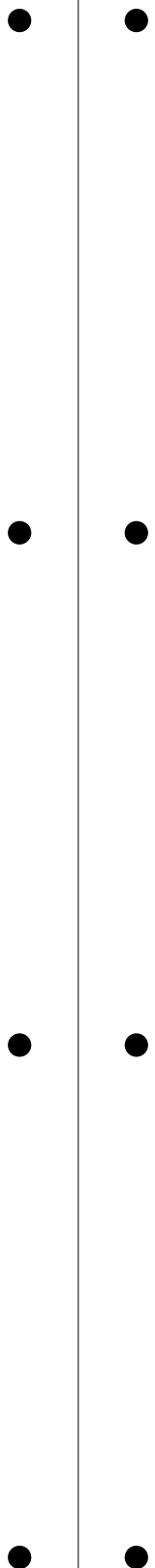
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The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art gratefully acknowledges the bequest intention of Roger Chao, whose future gift will support the next generation of artists. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all donors who choose to remain anonymous.



INSTALLATION VIEWS





Installation view, (left to right) Polly Borland, *Slit* 2025, *Bod (Bubbles)* 2023, *Toothy* 2025, *Bunny (resin)* 2025 in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne, and Private Collection, QLD. Photo: Andrew Curtis



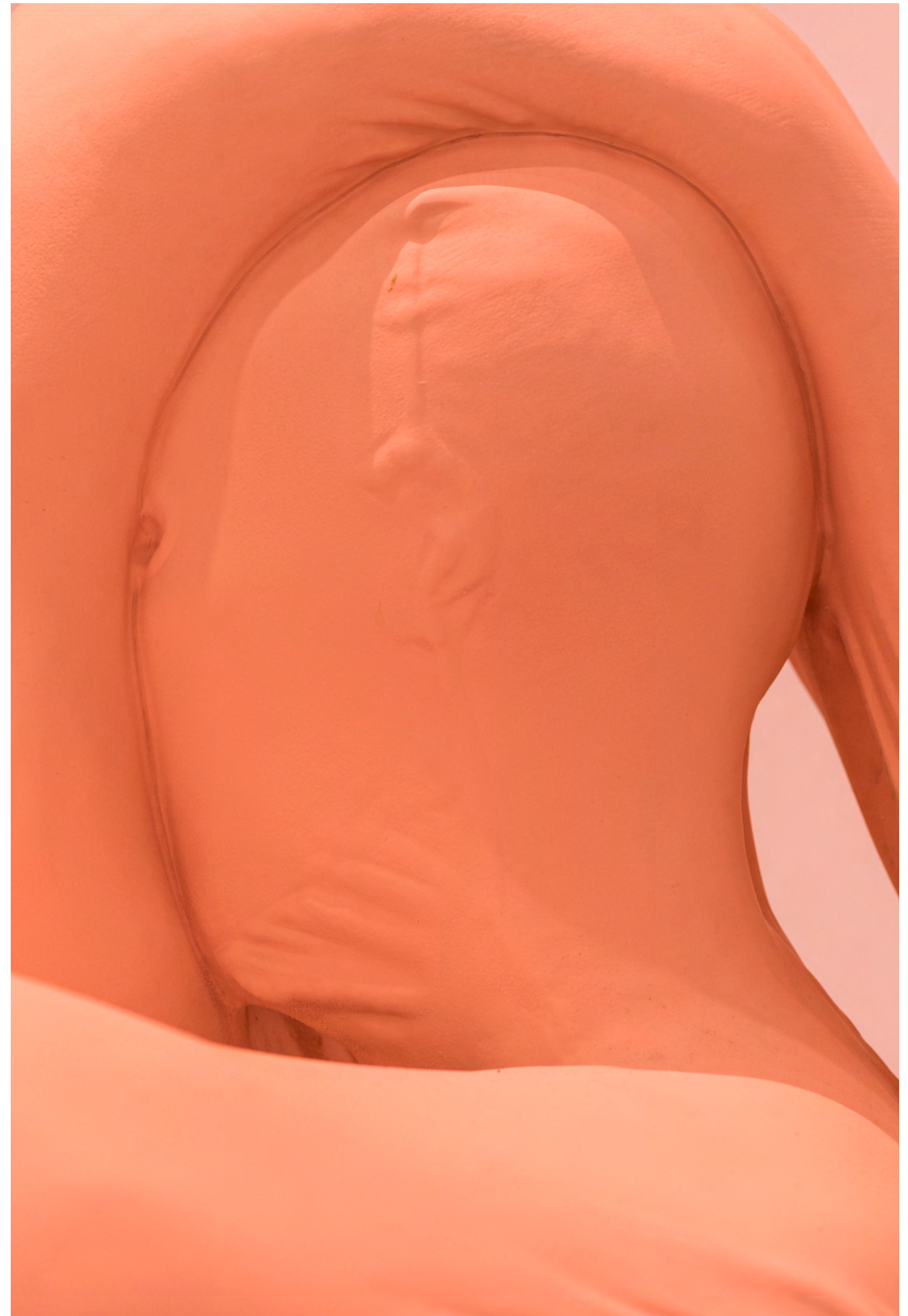
Installation view Polly Borland, *Froggy* 2025 (detail) in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view, (left to right) Polly Borland, *Bod (Bubbles)* 2023, *Toothy* 2025 in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist and MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view Polly Borland *BOD 2023* in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view Polly Borland *BOD 2023* (detail) in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf. Photo: Andrew Curtis







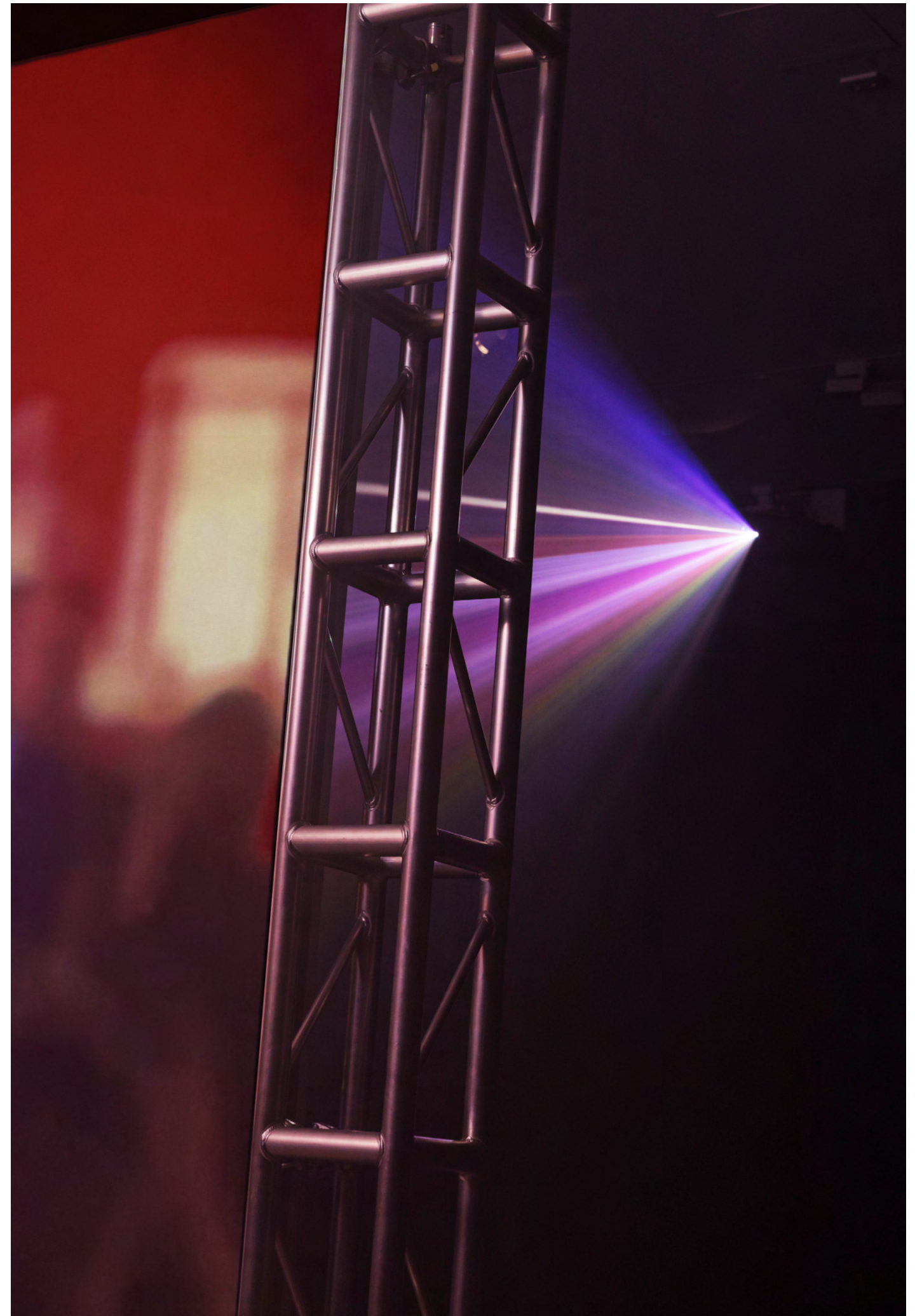








Installation view Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026 (detail) in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Sound by Jac Meddings AKA House Mum. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view Callum McGrath, *What's after this?* 2026 (detail) in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Sound by Jac Meddings AKA House Mum. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis





Installation view Kayla Mattes, *Lonely Planet 2025-2026* in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist. Supported in part by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis











Installation view Melissa Nguyen, *A letter to my mother; a letter to your mother* 2026, in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist.
Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis

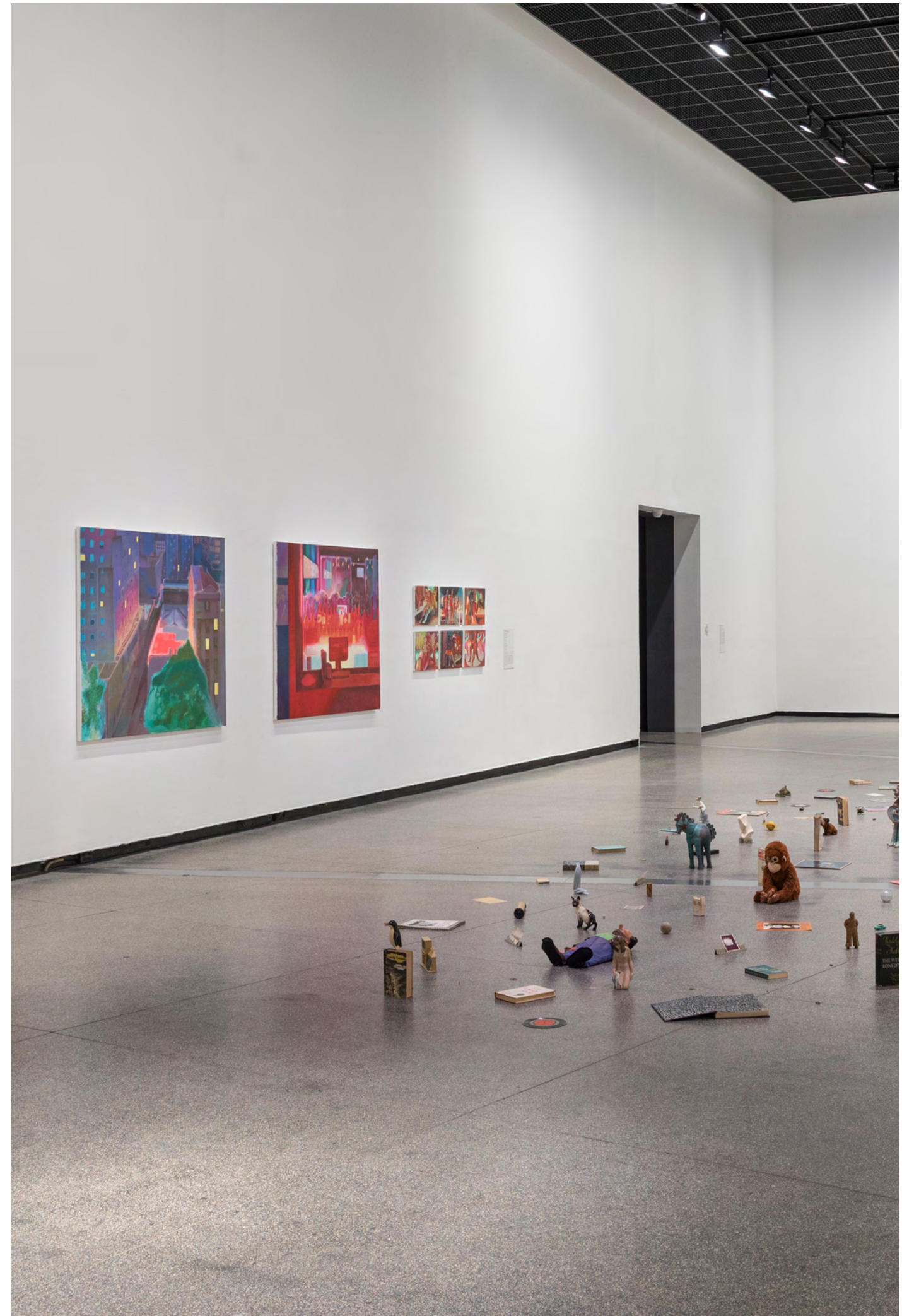


Installation view Nick Mullaly, *The Peel* 2026, in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis

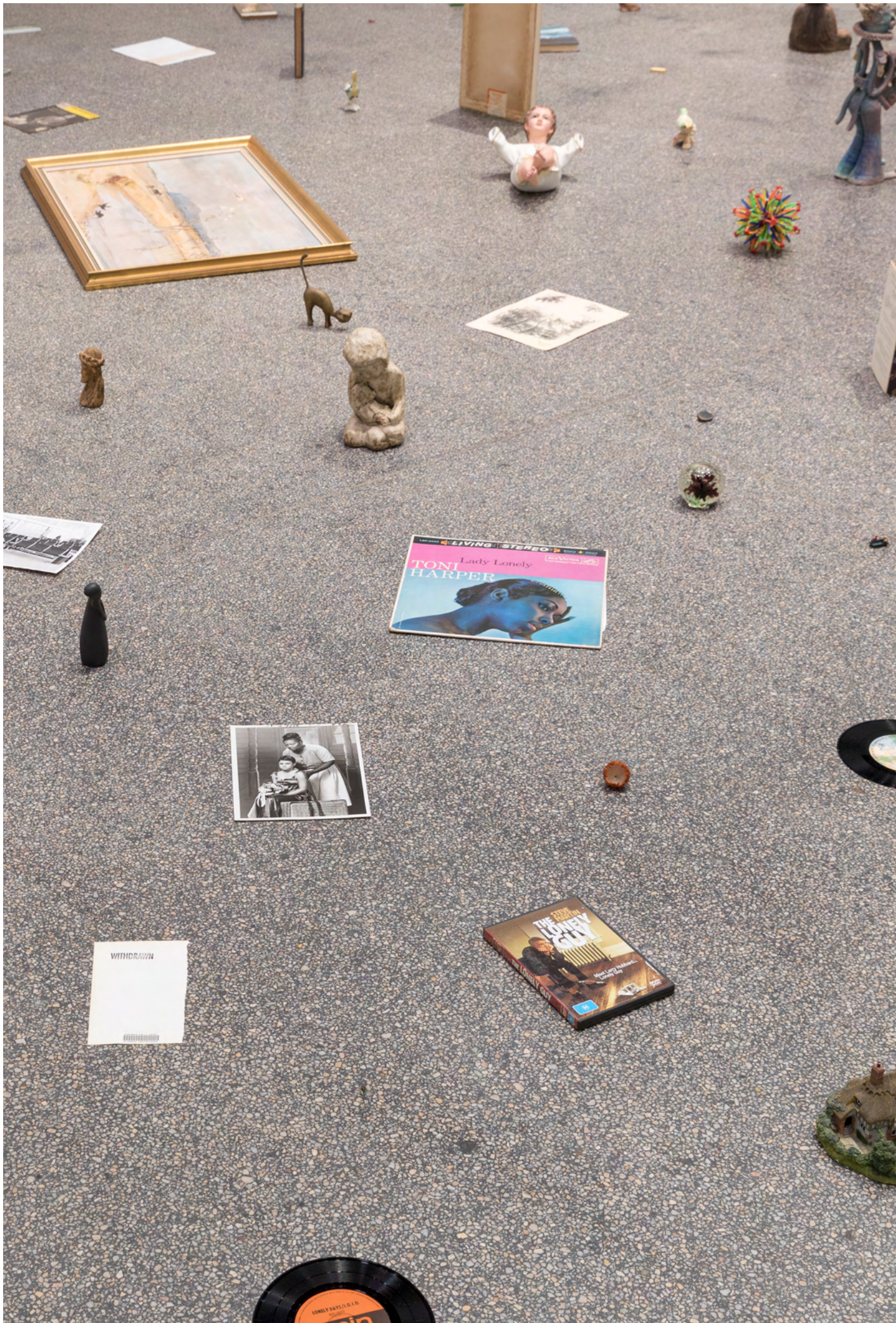
Installation view (clockwise, from top left) Nick Mullaly *Toss* 2026, *Second wind* 2026, *Payment* 2026, *Peering* 2026, *Key apparition* 2026, *Microphone* 2026, in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis



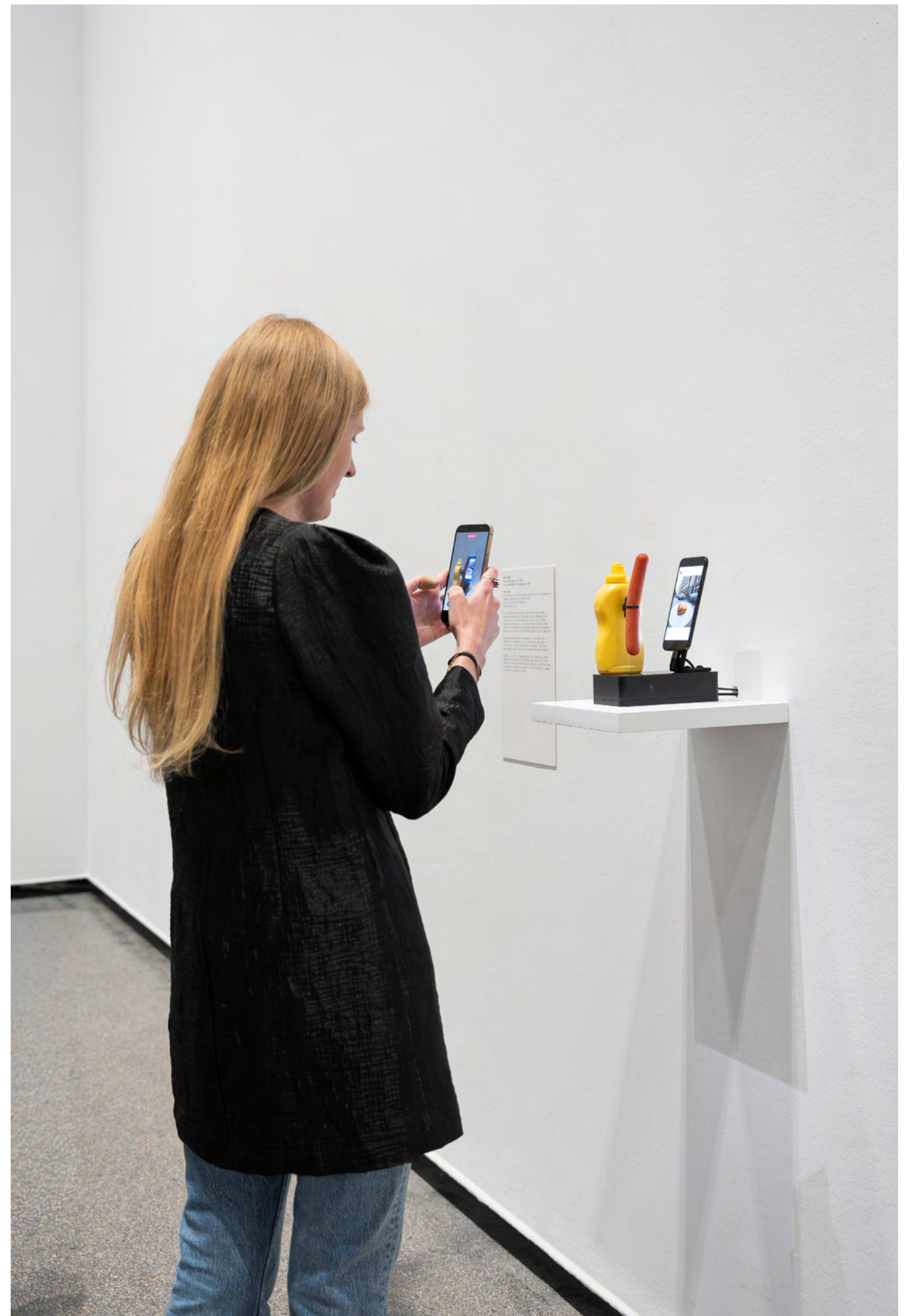
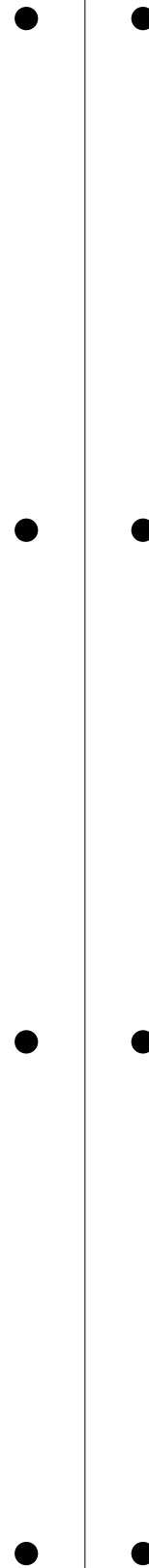
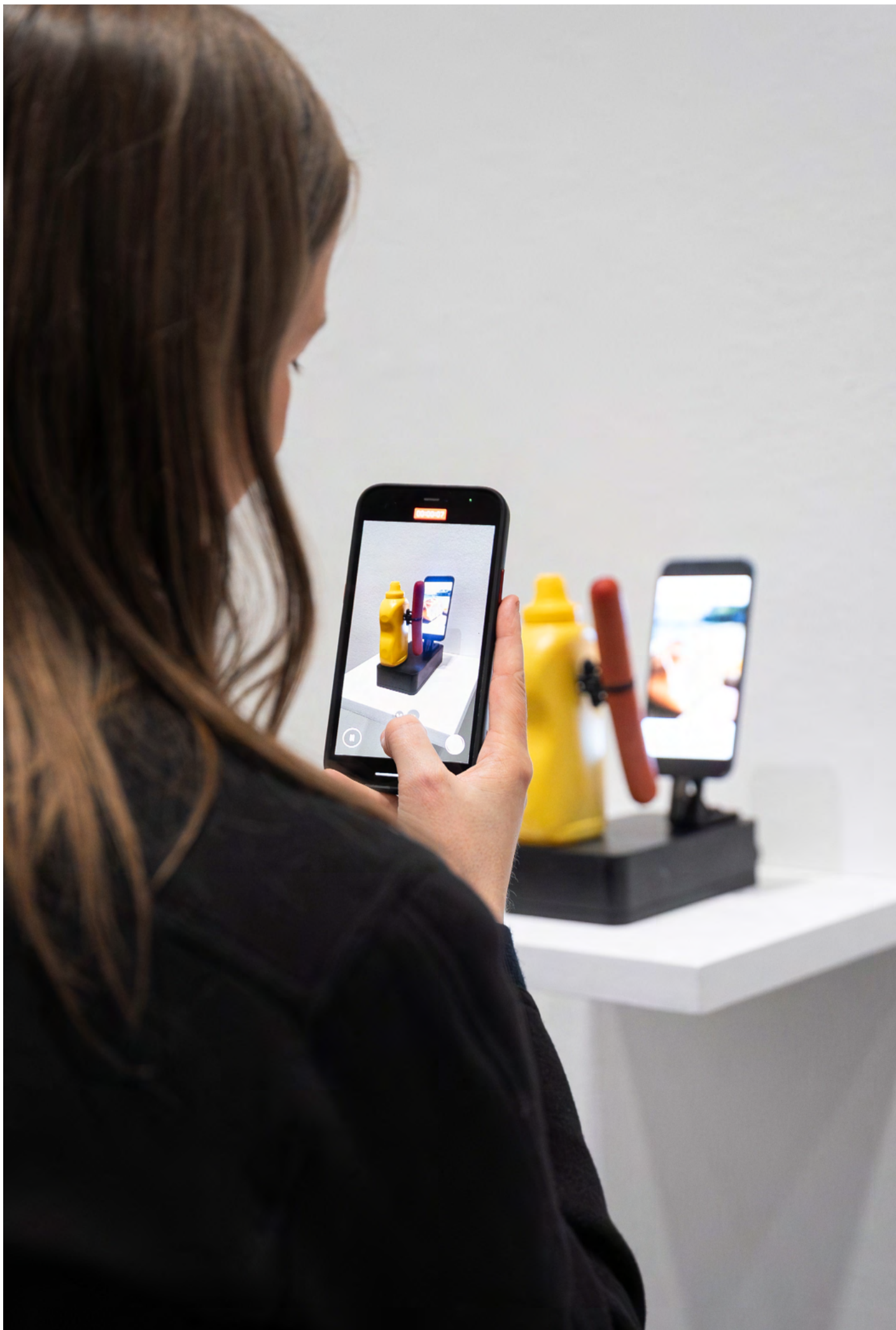
Installation view (left to right) Nick Mullaly, *Sircuit 2026*, *Miscellania 2026* in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist.
Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view Patrick Pound, *Museum of loneliness 2026* (detail), in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Naarm/Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Gadigal/Sydney Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne, 2026. Photo: Andrew Curtis



Installation view Seth Brown, *Frank* 2025, in *Are you lonely tonight? I'm so lonesome I could cry.*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2026. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Astrid Mulder

GIDEON APPAH

POLLY BORLAND

SETH BROWN

LUCY LIU

NATASHA MATILA-SMITH

KAYLA MATTES

CALLUM MCGRATH

NICK MULLALY

MELISSA NGUYEN

PATRICK POUND

KELLY YU